



CHAPIN HALL

CENTER FOR CHILDREN  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO



# Negotiating Among Opportunity and Constraint

## The Participation of Young People in Out-of-School-Time Activities

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In recent years, there has been increased policy interest in the way young people spend their time out of school, and in promoting the availability of opportunities for them to spend this time in productive and developmentally supportive ways. Out-of-school opportunities (such as arts and music programs, sports teams, community service, youth entrepreneurship opportunities, and a broad range of after-school programs) are increasingly seen as potentially powerful tools to promote positive youth development and to prevent problematic behaviors and poor youth outcomes.

In order to inform policy and practice that seeks to support youth development through the systems that affect young people and the programs available to them, it is essential to understand the nature of these opportunities, who participates in them, the reasons behind such participation, and the barriers and potential incentives that condition participation. This paper explores young people's perspectives on their out-of-school time and the influences, barriers, contexts, and processes that contribute to their choices and experiences.

### **Research Method and Questions**

Findings are based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with a total of 99 tenth graders in Chicago Public Schools. Young people were randomly selected from four schools located in communities that fell into the highest and lowest quartiles of availability (measured by number of youth-serving organizations) and socioeconomic status (measured by median family income).

Research questions that guide this investigation include:

- How do young people find out about and initially decide to become engaged in structured activities?
- What are the influences of key individuals in their lives, including parents, peers, and other adults?
- What are the influences of their neighborhood and school contexts on these decisions?
- What are the influences of program quality or content?
- How important are the auspices under which activities are provided?
- What barriers exist to program participation, and how do young people work to overcome these barriers?
- What gaps exist between young people's interests and program availability?
- What do young people expect to get out of programs, and how is this connected to their goals and expectations for the future?

## Research Findings

*Information and getting involved.* When compared with neighborhood organizations, schools have some structural advantages in being able to provide more organized, frequent, and targeted information to teens about activities—at least to those who attend school with some regularity. These advantages (e.g., a concentration of young people in a single building, prominent common areas for posting information, public address systems and periodic assemblies for announcements) may also be potentially useful for informing young people about activities *outside* of the school. More important, however, are the ways in which information is provided to young people about out-of-school-time opportunities through valued personal relationships (whether peers, adults, or siblings). These mechanisms are the most effective in actually getting young people involved and supporting their continued involvement. In addition, many young people's current involvement in activities is based on their earlier experiences in other programs. This suggests both the importance of investments made at earlier ages and the value of finding ways to bridge these earlier experiences to new opportunities as children enter adolescence.

*Influence of key individuals.* Young people may be influenced about how to spend their out-of-school time by parents, peers, and other adults. Invitations from non-family adults (including coaches, program staff, and club sponsors) are most frequently cited by young people as how they become involved in a structured activity, though teens retain critical expectations that adult staff will provide ongoing support and good leadership.

Peers' influence may be less direct than adult influence in shaping decisions about what formal programs to join; peer influence is most clearly important in decisions about informal activities and about *remaining* involved over time.

*Role of neighborhood and school contexts.* School settings may have several potential advantages as locations for after-school activities. They have facilities, provide program access for young people in school who want to attend, and, for many young people are convenient, familiar, and feel relatively safe. For some young people, however, several factors work against their involvement in school-based activities. These include the distance between home and school, a preference for not remaining on school property after the school day, limited transportation options, and concerns about navigating through unsafe neighborhoods (especially after dark). Schools also generate other expectations (e.g., homework, required GPA levels) that may constrain involvement.

Young people living in unsafe neighborhoods are doubly challenged to take advantage of either school-based or neighborhood-based activities, given the barriers of transportation and neighborhood threats. Among the most motivated, young people's perceptions about the lack of cleanliness, safety, or opportunities in their neighborhoods leads them to seek activities in other parts of the city or suburbs, or to express an interest in changing these

neighborhood conditions, which raises the possibility that some may benefit from access to activities that involve them in civic engagement, organizing, and social action.

*Assessments of school and neighborhood opportunities.* For the most part, young people identify a wide variety of activities in their schools and many fewer in their neighborhoods. Young people with whom we spoke who live in neighborhoods that appear to be relatively well endowed with youth programs of various sorts were just as likely to perceive a serious paucity of such opportunities as those who live in neighborhoods much less well endowed. This suggests, at a minimum, the need to find more effective ways to inform young people about what is available, and to provide clearer incentives for their participation. In both settings, however, they frequently identify a gap between what is available and what would be compelling to them. In some cases, youth's lack of interest reflects a belief that they lack the skills to participate in otherwise interesting activities (such as sports, music, or art).

*Assessments of program quality.* When asked to rank a list of attributes of programs or activities, and explain their preferences, young people indicate a strong interest in being exposed to new ideas, new challenges, and new people. At a second level of importance they highlight the need for programs to make them feel comfortable, welcomed, respected, and accepted. Third, they stress the desire to be given leadership opportunities, including providing opinions and ideas, and being given responsibilities.

As important as *what* is offered, young people emphasize the importance of *how* activities are organized. They express sensitivity to age differences among youth at programs, and an interest in segregating activities by age (or at least addressing the perception that younger children are their equals). More generally, they want opportunities to be free from unnecessary rules, inflexible adults, and strict expectations. Indeed, while this reflects findings in the youth development literature regarding attributes of good youth programs, many of the young people with whom we spoke were not speaking so much about programs as about a more flexible resource—safe space, facilities, access, ownership—that provided the occasion for more autonomous exploration, interaction, and relaxation. A common resource described by young people is a multi-use center that offers a combination of structure and freedom (emphasizing freedom), learning and recreation (emphasizing recreation), and safety and opportunity.

*Views of expected outcomes of participation in structured activities.* Many young people describe a connection between their out-of-school activities and present and future goals. The most common category of benefits was described as broadly maturational, including learning responsibility or dedication, how to work with other people, or even becoming “a better person.” Others focus on how involvement in such activities helps them to stay in good physical health or provide a welcome opportunity to relax. Some physical and cognitive skills are seen by young people to transfer immediately to another setting (e.g., from a sport like track to another like football), and presumed links to future impacts are described straightforwardly. Those interested in academic performance and college, for example, list potential benefits that included beefing up college applications, getting an

athletic scholarship, improving grades, and learning specific skills or knowledge that would be expected in college.

Not all youth, however, make any connection between participation in out-of-school-time activities and particular outcomes for them. Almost one-third of the young people with whom we spoke do not identify any link between what they do in their out-of-school activities (either formal or informal) and other goals. This disconnection is most common among youth who report no participation in formal activities, but it is also true for almost a quarter of the young people who *had* participated in a structured activity over the course of the year. Indeed, some young people deliberately avoid linking their time out of school with other specific goals or activities, especially their informal activities. As described by these young people, an important part of being a teenager is having fun, relaxing, and getting away from the stress of school, family, and (some) peers.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study helps us understand more about how youth negotiate both opportunities and constraints, the preferences they have, and what this suggests for policymaking and practice. In particular, it provides some insight into how to improve strategies for outreach, access, engagement, and provision. In considering these strategies, it is important to take a *systemic* view, focusing not only on numbers of programs and the details of program attributes (though these are clearly important), but also on the individual, familial, organizational, and neighborhood-level factors and dynamics that may have an impact on program attributes (e.g., availability, access, quality) as well as on participation and, ultimately, youth outcomes.

With regard to *outreach*, future efforts should seek to do the following:

- Take full advantage of the school setting as a place for connections to out-of-school-time activities, including those offered in the neighborhoods through community-based organizations and other providers
- Recognize the primacy of relationships in extending successful invitations to participate (e.g., from teachers, counselors, coaches, peers) and find ways to support that
- Emphasize the novelty, potential for youth leadership and social potential of activities

With regard to *access*, both neighborhood- and school-based activities need to be responsive to student interests, which may require

- Providing multiple opportunities and multiple points of entry in different kinds of settings, including schools, neighborhood organizations, and through connections to institutions and activities in other parts of the city
- Investing in building the capacity of both organizations and staff of this range of providers
- Improving transportation and increasing the use of “safe-passage” schemes
- Supporting programs that link youth- and community-development activities that can channel youth interests in improving their communities

With regard to *ongoing engagement*, it may be important to

- Improve strategies through which staff are recruited, trained and retained, including incentives to retain particularly skilled youth workers, whether professionals or volunteers, coaches, teachers, or mentors
- Developing strategies to encourage young people to maintain their involvement from middle school to high school by responding to changing interests, reinforcing a sense of connection to programs or providers, and a mix of fostering involvement of cohorts with participation of newcomers

Finally, with regard to *provision*, program offerings and delivery should

- Encourage and reflect input from young people themselves, combining to provide an array of opportunities that reflect their interests
- Represent a departure from the structure, oversight mechanisms, instrumental focus, and tenor of school-time activities,
- Allow for distinctions between what are “teen” and “child” activities

One overarching theme suggested by many of these implications for improving outreach, access, engagement, and provision is that of *connection*. This includes connections between school and neighborhood, across programs, across organizations, and across age groups. It also points to broader issues, such as addressing neighborhood factors (safety, stability, access) rather than just adjusting to the barriers they present, and promoting organizational capacity (staff, facilities, relationships) rather than focusing only on programmatic investments. To better understand what is likely to be effective on these fronts, we also need to develop a more refined understanding of the “supply side” of the out-of-school opportunity equation. This includes investigating the existence and functioning of local “systems” of opportunity for young people, the dynamics of organizational provision and interorganizational relationships that sustain them, and the ways in which such relationships within local networks may affect availability of, access to, and participation in out-of-school opportunities and that may, over time, contribute to youth outcomes.



## INTRODUCTION

Young people may spend their out-of-school time in a variety of ways. They may participate in formal after-school, extra-curricular, and other structured activities at school or in their communities. They may work, volunteer, care for younger siblings, focus on homework, or seek particular kinds of training. They may spend their time in positive, unstructured activities with friends or family. They may engage in more passive activities, like hanging out in the neighborhood, watching television, or playing video games. Or they may engage in various risky or antisocial behaviors, like substance abuse, crime, or gang-related activities.

In recent years, there has been an increased policy interest in the way young people spend their time out of school, and in promoting the availability of opportunities for them to spend this time in productive and developmentally supportive ways. Although formal voluntary organizations such as the Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA, and youth sports clubs have been operating since the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Sproul, 1941), current interest has led to increased investment of both public and philanthropic resources and to increased scrutiny of program quality, availability, participation, and impact (Larner et al., 1999).

Out-of-school opportunities (such as arts and music programs, sports teams, community service, youth entrepreneurship opportunities, and after-school programs) are increasingly seen as potentially powerful tools to promote positive youth development and to prevent problematic behaviors and poor youth outcomes. On the developmental side, such opportunities are credited with the potential, for example, to enhance school achievement, increase self-confidence, and foster civic responsibility (e.g., Catalano et al., 1998; McLaughlin et al., 2000; Larson, 2000) and with strengthening a range of physical, intellectual, psychological, and social developmental assets (Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Gambone, Klem and Connell, 2002). On the preventive side, they have been engaged to reduce the incidence of, for example, early pregnancy, substance abuse, and criminal activity (e.g., Kirby and Coyle, 1997; Catalano et al., 1998; Eccles and Gootman, 2002).

In order to inform policy and practice that seeks to support youth development through the systems that affect young people and the programs available to them, it is essential to understand the nature of these opportunities, who participates in them, the reasons behind such participation, and the barriers and potential incentives that condition participation. Indeed, since nearly one half of teenagers' waking time in the United States is discretionary (Larson, 2001), how they spend this time may be quite instrumental to their well-being. Understanding the influences, processes, and assessments that young people make to guide their decision making and time use is therefore of clear significance to policy and practice.

Although much of the focus on out-of-school time and after-school program provision has tended to focus on children in elementary and middle school, several recent studies provide information on how older adolescents spend their out-of-school time (e.g.,

Fuligni and Stevenson, 1995; Larson and Verma, 1999; Larson, 2001; Huebner and Mancini, 2003; Juster, Ono and Stafford, 2004; Goerge and Chaskin, 2004). According to these studies, most of this time is spent in unstructured activities, from watching television to hanging out with friends (Zill, Nord, and Loomis, 1995; Larson, 2001; Goerge and Chaskin, 2004). Reports of participation rates in *structured* activities—from extracurricular activities provided under school auspices to non-school clubs, volunteering, church or other religious activities, and employment—vary, from about 30 percent of ninth graders (Goerge and Chaskin, 2004), to nearly half of ninth to twelfth graders (Huebner and Mancini, 2003), to 71 percent of eighth graders (U.S. Department of Education, 1990). In addition, given the different time-frames about which the questions were asked (e.g., point-in-time; at least once weekly), it is difficult to estimate patterns and level of involvement among teenagers in formal out-of-school activities across existing studies.

Further, relatively little research is available that focuses on the *determinants* of young people's participation in out-of-school-time activities, and teasing out these influences is challenging. Participation in various kinds of out-of-school activities (and the kinds of impacts such participation may have on young people) is likely to be influenced by many factors beyond what any given program or activity provides. These include, for example, the individual characteristics of young people themselves, the characteristics of the communities in which they live, the availability and nature of the out-of-school opportunities available to them, the kinds of relationships young people have with family, peers, and non-family adults, and their relationship with the different institutions and organizations (school, church, community center, police) with which they are involved.

Available research suggests that there are some individual- and family-level factors associated with participation, such as academic achievement (higher-achieving students are more likely to participate), family socioeconomic status (young people from higher-SES families are more likely to participate), parental endorsement and parental modeling (both being positively related to participation), family structure (young people from two-parent families are more likely to participate), and race/ethnicity (Latino youth are less likely to participate) (U.S. Department of Education, 1990; Raymore, Godbey and Crawford, 1994; Huebner and Mancini, 2003; cf. Holland and Andre, 1987; Lock and Costello, 2000 for reviews). However, little is known about the circumstances and processes through which these factors operate, other considerations that provide incentives or erect barriers to participation, or the ways in which young people interpret and negotiate among the opportunities and constraints they face in structuring their out-of-school time.

This report explores young people's perspectives on their use of out-of-school time and the influences, barriers, contexts, and processes that contribute to their choices and experiences. Research questions that guide our investigation include:

- How do young people find out about and initially decide to become engaged in structured activities?

- What are the influences of key individuals in their lives, including parents, peers, and other adults?
- What are the influences of their neighborhood and school contexts on these decisions?
- What are the influences of program quality or content?
- How important are the auspices under which activities are provided?
- What barriers exist to program participation, and how do young people work to overcome these barriers?
- What gaps exist between young people's interests and program availability?
- What do young people expect to get out of programs, and how is this connected to their goals and expectations for the future?

The report is organized in six parts. First, we briefly review the nature of the data and methods upon which our analysis is based. Next, we explore how young people learn about and get involved in different activities. Third, we investigate the factors and processes of negotiation that inform their choices, including the influence of parents, peers, other adults, and the community and school contexts in which they live. Fourth, we investigate young people's assessments of the opportunities available to them. This includes their perspectives on supply (e.g., accessibility and array), quality (including program and environmental attributes), and expectations (including the value they place on out-of-school opportunities and the kinds of impacts they expect from them). Fifth, we present a set of four individual case studies that illustrate the ways in which young people, in response to different circumstances, negotiate among opportunity and constraint to shape their out-of-school time use. Finally, we explore the implications of young people's perspectives and experiences for policy and practice, including potential responses at the program, neighborhood, and system levels.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The analysis presented in this report is based on in-depth interviews conducted with 99 tenth graders in Chicago Public Schools (CPS). Interviews followed administration of a large-scale, closed-response survey of ninth graders in CPS high schools conducted by Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago in 2003 (subsequent waves were conducted of ninth and tenth graders in 2004 and ninth, tenth, and eleventh graders in 2005).<sup>1</sup> The in-depth interviews were designed in part to “get behind” the numbers and

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<sup>1</sup> The first wave of this survey was administered to all CPS students in the ninth grade in January and February of 2003. School personnel administered the questionnaire primarily during the students' advisory periods. Of the 33,000 ninth graders in CPS high schools, one-half of them completed surveys. We received responses from 60 schools and high response rates from 48 schools. The response included sufficient numbers of young people from all Chicago communities and all racial and ethnic groups to allow our results to be representative of all CPS ninth graders and to reflect the diversity of these youth.

help interpret survey findings, but especially to ask some different kinds of questions that could not be answered in a closed-response survey format. Interviews were guided by a three-page, semi-structured interview protocol that asked all respondents a predetermined set of open-ended questions. This ensured responses by all respondents to a core set of questions in order to facilitate cross-respondent comparison while allowing the opportunity for unforeseen issues and observations to be provided by each respondent during the course of the interview.

The study design began with the selection of schools and employed a purposeful sample (Patton, 1990), selecting schools that were located at the extremes of two measures: levels of availability of formal out-of-school opportunities and neighborhood income. A random sample of students was then drawn in each of four schools located in communities that fell into the highest and lowest quartiles of availability (measured by number of youth-serving organizations) and socioeconomic status (measured by median family income) (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 lists the schools selected for this study, and the youth service and neighborhood income attributes of each school's community area. All four schools selected for the study agreed to participate. Two of the schools, Westinghouse Career Academy and Carver Military Academy, are also sites for After School Matters programs, which represent a major source of out-of-school-time activity for Chicago high school students. After School Matters (ASM) is a nonprofit organization that works closely with the City of Chicago, the Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Park District, Chicago Public Library, and local CBOs to increase out-of-school opportunities for youth in targeted Chicago neighborhoods. ASM uses an apprenticeship model to instruct students in areas such as art, dance, sports, technology, and writing.

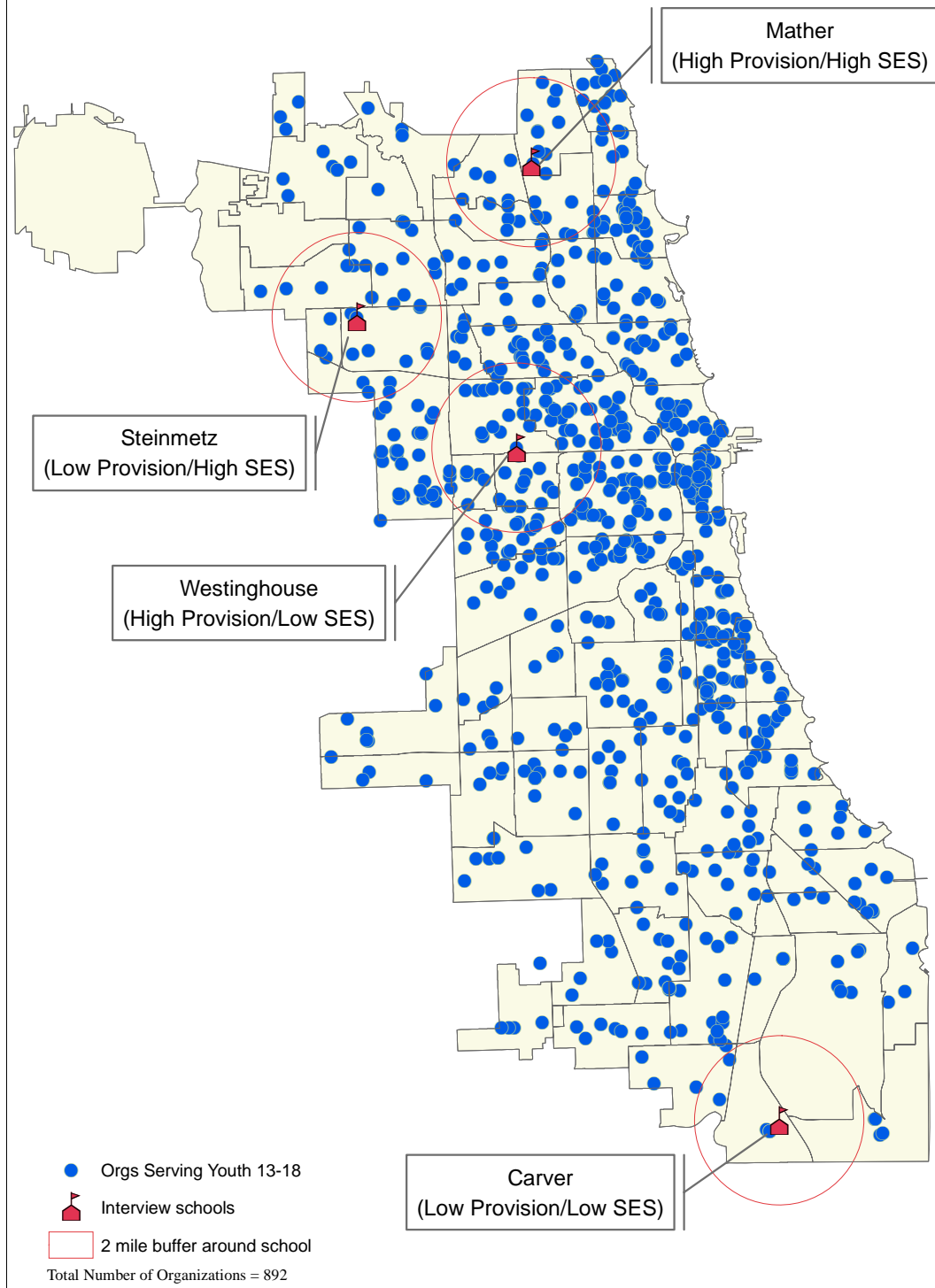
Because high schools draw their student body from relatively dispersed geographical areas, we randomly sampled 160 young people who replied to the 2003 survey in two strata: those who lived within a mile of their school and those who lived farther than 2 miles from their school. This allows us to investigate the relationships young people have with their school and residential communities and the different kinds of barriers and opportunities faced by young people living in different neighborhoods but attending the same school. Because of anonymity concerns, we were limited to identifying students by their home census tract. In each school, twenty young people were randomly selected

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<sup>2</sup> The analysis of youth program availability is based on a database we developed including unduplicated records drawn and merged from five sources: the United Way Human Care Services Directory of Metropolitan Chicago 2000 (The Blue Book) Electronic Edition, Yellow Pages listings for 2003, the National Center on Charitable Statistics, Guidestar (a national database providing data on nonprofits that file IRS 990 forms), and the Chicago Area Directory of Organizations. In addition, we supplemented information from these sources from websites of organizations and public agencies (e.g., the Chicago Park District, After School Matters, YouthNets) and from a survey of organizations Chapin Hall conducted on behalf of the Illinois Workforce Board.

**Figure 1**

**Schools in High- and Low-Provision/High- and Low-SES Communities**



from each of these two pools of eligible students, and invited to participate in the study. (To account for youth who took the survey in ninth grade but were no longer at the school, a reserve pool of students was also randomly identified.)

**Table 1**  
**High schools selected for interviews**

	<i><b>Low neighborhood poverty rate</b></i>	<i><b>High neighborhood poverty rate</b></i>
<i><b>Low formal youth service availability</b></i>	Steinmetz Academic Center	Carver Military Academy
<i><b>High formal youth service availability</b></i>	Mather High School	Westinghouse Career Academy

Following data collection, a codebook was generated deductively from the research questions and inductively from early analyses of interview responses, and codes were incorporated in the qualitative analysis program Atlas.ti. Coding and analysis of interviews occurred at multiple points and degrees of conceptualization. Interviewers wrote a cover sheet that summarized the top three interview themes, the similarity or differences in views with other young people in the sample, and new or emerging ideas. Coding staff met weekly to review coding use, and inter-rater reliability was checked at three points. Adopting a technique from content analysis, we looked at numerical counts of core codes as one way of gauging the relative importance of different influences. In addition, a vignette of each interview was written that detailed each young person's past and current involvement in formal programs and informal activities, their views of these activities, and plans and concerns about future goals. The vignettes provide a cross-check for themes and explanations that had been identified in the code-driven analysis and offer an integrated summary of individual young people's choices and experiences.

### **GETTING ENGAGED: INFORMATION, OUTREACH, AND CONNECTION**

A number of forces shape the transition from adolescence to adulthood, including interest in greater independence, stronger peer reference groups, and changing relations with parents and other adults. The choices that adolescents make about which skills to develop, which attitudes and values to reinforce, and which behaviors to avoid can have important implications for their further development and life trajectory.

The tenth-grade students with whom we spoke are at several identifiable crossroads. Many are looking forward to getting a driver's license and access to a car. Many are

preparing to join the formal labor market, or had recently done so. Many are beginning to have romantic interests and facing competing claims on their free time among peer groups. At the same time, these young people are operating in different contexts—at home, in school, in their neighborhoods—that provide both opportunity and constraint to inform their choices, and are negotiating pressures at school (shaped by policy expectations regarding formal grades and standardized achievement tests) that determine both their present access to extracurricular activities and the range of opportunities likely to be open to them after high school.

We understand relatively little about how these various influences and interests are considered by young people as they make choices about how to spend their leisure time. For example, although many young people identify particular barriers to engaging in structured activities in their time out of school (caring for younger siblings, doing homework), fully one-third of ninth graders responding to the High School Survey who want to participate in such activities offered no specific reason that prevents them from doing so (Goerge and Chaskin, 2004).

In the section below, we begin to explore this question. First, we investigate how young people learn about structured opportunities in the first place, and which sources and processes are most influential for them. Next, we explore how they are influenced by the interests and expectations of key individuals like parents, peers, and other adults. We also explore how young people's perceptions of the neighborhood and school contexts in which they spend their time shape their views of the availability and attractiveness of resources and influence their likelihood of participation. In doing so, we begin to tease out some of the implications for practice and policy that might better respond to the circumstances under which young people live in order to support their positive engagement in out-of-school-time activities.

### **Learning About Programs**

Young people learn about activities through a variety of sources, and they get factual information about them in tandem with other messages, such as promises about the benefits or social pleasures of participating. In later sections, we tease out these corollary messages and their effects in more detail. Here, we seek initially to identify how young people *find out* about the activities in which they participate or consider, and the relative influence of different ways of learning about them on their decisions to participate.

Young people most frequently described joining a structured activity after learning about it from an adult, and this holds true both for activities that operate inside and outside of school. Information about these activities often comes in the form of a personal invitation from someone with authority in the activity, like a teacher who sponsors an after-school club or the coach of a school sports team. For programs outside of school, parents or other adult relatives, friends of parents, or activity staff are all instrumental in connecting young people to activities. Furthermore, once a connection is established with a young person, an adult sometimes provides the link to yet other activities. For

example, several young people on school basketball teams were informed about summer basketball programs by their coaches at school, and one found out about an indoor soccer league a similar way.

Peers and siblings were also cited as important sources of initial information. Like coaches and adult program leaders, peers who tell young people about activities are often involved in them themselves, which lends value to the invitation.

Up until last year I didn't know what lacrosse was, and my best friend was like, 'you'll have a blast, come and join us.' I'm like 'sure.' So I joined.

Older siblings are another important source of information, often based on their earlier participation. In their roles as more experienced advisors, older siblings are able to help young people sort out offerings at schools. This is how one young person describes his initial connection to Pakistani club at his high school:

. . . my brother used to be in this school and he is like 'that is the one club you could just come in and have like your service hours and everything, and it is fun too.' So I was like 'OK.' I went there.

Although it is difficult to draw conclusions about the relative importance of adult versus peer and sibling roles in connecting young people with information about out-of-school opportunities, it is clear that information coming to them through valued personal relationships is much more powerful than anonymous or socially unmediated information. Written materials such as letters, flyers, booklets or even old yearbooks were also cited by young people as mechanisms through which they learn about activities, but they are clearly less important and effective. Such mechanisms have their place, though they appear to be more effective when provided in schools versus through neighborhood-based channels. Schools provide a more organized and targeted venue for channeling printed information to youths; although many young people said that printed material was an important source of information at least for making them aware of school activities, only one participant in a neighborhood program said the same. Young people also get useful information from special events such as school orientations, information kiosks, and presentations in the school lunchroom. However, such information is rarely acted on by young people without some supporting interaction with a valued person who makes the information come alive as a possibility in some way. Only a few young people said they learned about and decided to join an activity after hearing an announcement over the school intercom or at church, and some noted that such announcements are sometimes hard even to hear in their noisy classrooms.

Several of the young people had made their initial contact with their current program or activity in prior years. Thus, their participation in a sport or other after-school activity reflects earlier investments made to connect young people to these activities. This connection over time suggests that it may be important both to establish activities that can interest youths at younger ages, and to find ways that schools and organizations providing such activities can monitor and accommodate the maturation and changing interests of



participants. This may include, for example, incorporating young people's input into program provision to ensure programs are responsive as their interests change, and providing better links to other opportunities and resources outside of the initial activity that match the evolving interests of youth (Grossman et al., 2002). Understanding the *trajectory* of young people's interests and involvement in structured activities over time may thus be an important element in improving the system of services available.

Finally, some young people who were participating in neighborhood programs identified their physical proximity to the program as the principal source of their information or reason for connection. One young person lived in a neighborhood where a new Boys and Girls Club was being built, watched its construction, and felt connected to it before it even opened:

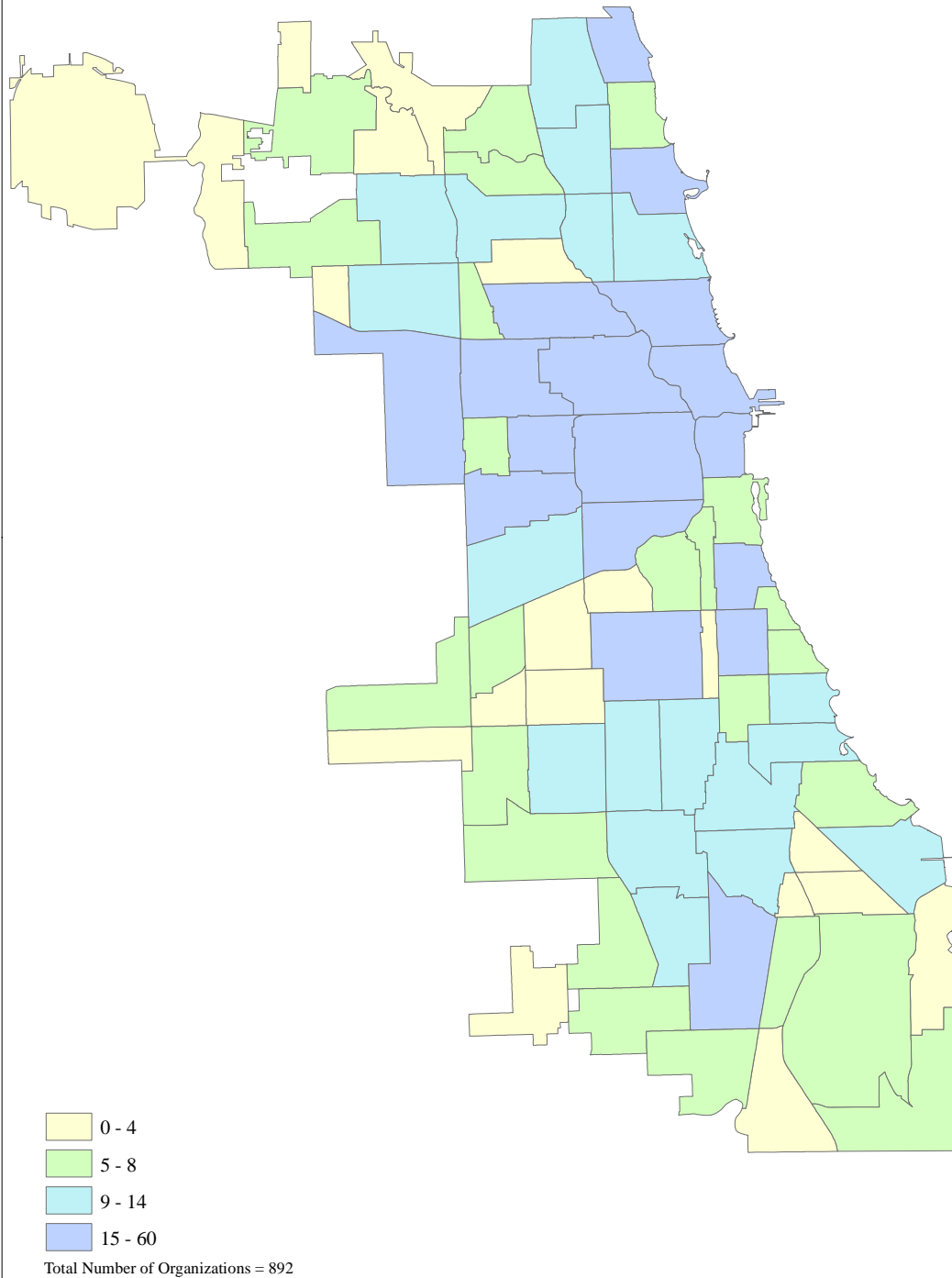
They built it in our neighborhood. That is how we started going to it—when they finished building it. . . . They had it on a special opening for it when they cut the ribbon and all that. And we went to that, too.

Given the limitations to being able to leverage physical proximity in neighborhoods, finding other ways to make young people aware of and strengthen their connections to community institutions may be an important strategy to pursue. This may not be an easy task. In addition to differences in the number of such organizations that exist in different communities (see Figure 2 for Chicago), their orientations, capacities, and resources also differ, as does the nature and quality of the activities they offer, the extent to which they are perceived as welcoming and accessible, the degree to which they are responsive to youth and community needs, and the extent to which they work with other organizations to deliver services (McLaughlin et al., 1994; Halpern, 1999; Quinn, 1999). We need to learn more about effective outreach strategies and how to support the capacity of community organizations to connect with and best serve young people.

In a later section of this report, we will further explore the perspectives of young people on the relative advantages, disadvantages, and potential contributions of neighborhoods, neighborhood organizations, and schools as settings for after-school activities. With regard to *learning* about programs and opportunities, however, it seems that, overall, schools hold a basic structural advantage over neighborhood settings for most young people who attend school. As students in school, young people are a captive audience, and schools have multiple opportunities and mechanisms through which to exchange information. The “advisory” (or “homeroom”) classroom and the relationships that may develop between teachers and students through their various interactions can support connections between young people, teachers, and the activities they know about. Lunchroom informational displays, other written materials, and public address announcements can all, at a minimum, put basic information in front of a large number of young people, even when they are not motivated to seek out information. Neighborhood programs tend to lack the same capacity for a similarly centralized and multifaceted information campaign.

**Figure 2**

**Community Areas by Number of Organizations Serving Youth 13 to 18**



In some instances, the structural advantages provided by schools can also be leveraged to help young people connect with *outside* organizations or opportunities. This is the basic rationale behind the idea of school-linked services and the kinds of school-community partnerships facilitated under community and full-service school schemes (Levy and Shepardson, 1992; Dryfoos, 1994). In the context of out-of-school opportunities, where information is known and relationships exist, or where staff is available to make these connections, youth interest that is initiated or identified in the school may be connected to other opportunities outside the school. In some instances (After School Matters in Chicago is one example), outside agencies provide information about, access to, or formal programs themselves directly in schools. The possibility of connecting young people across institutions that provide services or activities may have implications for how programs in different settings engage in recruiting young people to their activities. As we will soon discuss, for many young people, the availability of many different opportunities—new activities, new issues, the opportunity to meet new friends—is a key ingredient in capturing and maintaining their interest. It may be that young people who get involved in one setting might, given the opportunity, choose to stay involved in some kind of formal activity if they can be matched with additional opportunities that provide new experiences in different settings.

## **FACTORS AND PROCESSES OF NEGOTIATION THAT INFORM YOUNG PEOPLE'S CHOICES**

Beyond providing information and calling young people's attention to particular out-of-school opportunities in which they might get engaged, there are a number of factors that may contribute to the process of negotiation and decision making in which young people engage to determine how they will spend their time out of school. Here we focus on two sets of influences: individuals who have particular relationships with young people and characteristics of the neighborhood and school contexts in which young people spend their time.

### **Parents, Peers, and Other Adults**

Individuals like adults, peers, and relatives do more than just provide information to young people about after-school opportunities. They shape how that information is conveyed, project their own particular authority and influence, and frame the activity in light of its purported benefits. In this section, we explore some of the specific kinds of influences that these different individuals have—or seek to have—on young people.

## Parents

Although the influences of peers, school, and neighborhood processes are increasingly direct for older adolescents, where they have been largely mediated by parents, caretakers, and the home environment for younger children (Aber et al., 1997), parents often still play a critical role in shaping the connections that their adolescent children have with neighborhood institutions and resources that can provide oversight when they are not present. Young people can be either well- or ill-served by their parents' efforts in locating, vetting, negotiating, and limiting potential opportunities for their children, within and beyond their neighborhoods (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Furstenberg, 2001). Young people with whom we spoke describe a variety of tactics parents used to shape their children's choices. These include giving direct advice, granting permission to youth-initiated requests, asking young people "leading" questions to direct their involvement, informing them about activities, setting rules and limits on involvement, providing (or withholding) emotional support for participation in activities, providing financial incentives or other direct support for participation, signing them up for an activity without consultation, and co-participating in activities. Different parents are more or less successful in influencing their children's choices and—according to young people—are often limited in the strength and scope of their influence. Parent influence may also be inconsistent, as when different parents offer alternative or opposing viewpoints.

For the most part, young people describe parents as supporting their participation in structured activities, and even providing a longer-term view of the benefits of participation. For example, many parents were described as suggesting alternate, "backup" activities that were related to possible future careers. When asked directly, many young people claim to be largely uninfluenced by their parents, though they often provide counter-examples when describing how they learn about and decide on how to spend their out-of-school time. For example, as one young person describes:

She'll help me find places to go, she like 'you don't want to go here? Or go here?' She was trying to help me find places to go and things to do. . . .

Parents may also seek to disconnect or protect their children from outside activities or specific contexts. These tactics appear to be driven by parental concerns about bad influences. Parents often create and tailor family-management techniques in response to the opportunities and constraints provided by the environment, and their ability to do so effectively can have significant impact on young people's well-being and developmental trajectory (Furstenberg et al., 1999). Among young people with whom we spoke, this defensive strategy appears to be directed primarily at informal activities like "hanging out" with friends or being left unsupervised to be exposed to neighborhood risks:

I don't go anywhere by myself. My mother does not allow me to go anywhere by myself. You know, I have enemies. The last time I went somewhere by myself, I got jumped on. So that's why I don't, yeah she don't too much allow me to go anywhere by myself.

As a general strategy, however, this approach may also limit participation in positive, developmental activities. As we will discuss further, the context in which these choices get made is a critical variable, especially the different degrees of safety or danger presented in different neighborhoods of residence and in and around the schools young people attend.

Parental attempts to influence young people appear to be conditional in many ways, and often reflect individualized assessments of the youth's preferences, maturity or sense of responsibility, and academic expectations. Parents also seek to match how young people spend their time with their own parental values, and their knowledge of and comfort with others participating. Parental values, in combination with factors such as family size, sibling age, and parent work schedules can also contribute to expectations that youth provide daycare to siblings, work in the family business (or otherwise help support the family) or in general stick closer to home. Indeed, nearly 30 percent of ninth-grade students in Chicago Public Schools report needing to supervise younger siblings or other children after school (Goerge and Chaskin, 2004). Our sample included several youths who were first-generation immigrants from Mexico, other Latin American countries, and Poland. These young people described parents who were on average more protective and restrictive, both in more closely monitoring their friends and in their expectations about time to be spent in family activities.

## **Peers**

It is difficult to assess the impact of peer influence on young people's decisions. By peers, we mean both friends and similarly aged youth who form a less personal (but potentially meaningful) reference group. Understanding peer influence is complicated by young people's frequent, direct denials about the influence of other peers, while simultaneously claiming themselves as sources of positive influence on others. In doing so, they affirm the existence of peer influence, even if they describe it asymmetrically.

Consistent with young people's perceptions of independence, some explained that peer influence was trumped by their personal interest or lack of interest in the activity itself. As one young person said: "I am not gonna go and try out for something that my friend wants me to or for the heck of it. I want to do something that I would enjoy."

Though its importance was downplayed in general, peers engage in many different behaviors that have the potential to influence other young people, including offering advice, encouraging or discouraging choices, serving as a model (e.g., by participating in activities the young person finds attractive or, alternately, distasteful), endorsing an activity, and providing resources to facilitate an activity (e.g., a basketball hoop).

Where young people identified the influence of peers, they offered different bases for its power. In general, however, youths who described peer influence were motivated by the potential of social connections. Some did not want to be in a program by themselves, preferring the comfort of participating with an existing friend. Others were attracted to

programs by the expectation that they would become closer to program participants, and even make new friends. In this sense, the influence of peers sometimes came directly from existing friends, and indirectly from young people's general interest in meeting other teens. This interest in sociability and novelty is a theme that was present throughout our interviews, and one to which we will return.

Peer influence may be indirectly important when young people consider activities on the basis of their social potential, and it may exert itself in the ongoing but subtle process of peer self-selection. This kind of low-grade peer influence was clearest when young people described their "hanging out" time. Young people described the pleasure of spending time with people who see things the way they do, and with whom there are few perceived differences in power or opinion. This was the typical description of peer time spent together, characterized as an important supportive environment. When peers weren't "getting along," however, or when youths were concerned that peers would get them "in trouble," they often said they simply spent less time with their friends.

Consistent with peers exercising influence in more subtle, continuous social interactions, young people did often identify peer influence in their decisions to *stay* involved in formal activities. Despite the fact that they often rejected the notion that peers influenced the decision to get involved in the first place, they were more likely to allow that peer behavior (such as "making an activity fun") did influence their ongoing participation. In general, young people's views about peer influence may be a way of trying to reconcile their sense of independence and leadership among their own peers, with a pervasive interest in socializing with other teens. This also may have implications for practice, by recognizing and seeking to build on the centrality of particular social groups and encouraging their continuity as a mechanism to maintain participation over the longer term.

## **Other Adults**

As we noted earlier, adults outside the family are often a critical factor in getting young people involved in formal activities. When young people make a connection to a program through an adult like a teacher, coach, pastor, or program staff, it is often the result of a direct invitation to participate. Young people appear to accept these offers because they are flattered by the invitation, and because these adults are seen as accepting, caring, helpful, easy to talk with—and even "fun" and "cool." These invitations may also reflect the adults' informed assessments of the youth's interests and developmental needs. Certain adults can thus function as nurturing and respectful figures to young people, and sometimes are seen in stark contrast to other school staff (e.g., school administrators and security staff). Of course this is a highly relational dynamic, and depends on an appropriate matching of interests, styles, and complementary personalities (see, e.g., Tierney, Grossman and Resch 1995). Some of what makes these relationships work is fairly intangible, based largely on a sense of mutuality and caring that can be a powerful influence (cf. Rauner, 2000). As one young person put it:

. . . you want to have somebody to care. You don't want to be there even though you're with your friends and you're having fun, you're still with that person who's in charge of you and who don't care. So there's no point of going if they don't care about you.

For some, these relationships become close enough for young people to share important concerns, which can support their ongoing involvement:

[My soccer coach] asks us if we have any problems. . . . If it's just something I want to let out, you know, he will listen to me, be there instead of just report me and everything.

These relationships, of course, are not always so positive, and some young people avoid particular after-school activities specifically because of their prior experiences with the adult sponsoring the activity. Young people may become involved but become disenfranchised when adults fail to motivate them, or to prevent infighting among teammates or participants. Youths can become frustrated over time with adults who are not effective leaders, and do not provide a sense of safety and structure. This is complicated by the fact that different youth have different expectations, and respond differently to adults' styles of interaction, which may lead to young people's selecting in or out of particular activities at any given time.

Seen as a group, parents, peers, and other adults have potentially powerful but often divergent pathways of influence upon young people. Peers' influence may be less direct than adult influence when young people find out and decide what formal programs to join, though may still be instrumental, and is clearly important in decisions about informal activities and about whether to *remain* involved in formal activities. Parents appear to have the most varied approaches and ways of influencing youth participation, though the extent to which they are effective differs from family to family, and operates in response to different opportunities and constraints depending on their circumstances. Despite their different relationships to young people, however, these different individuals sometimes use the same currency. One of the recurrent themes in our interviews was young people's interest in having "fun" in an activity, and youths shared examples of parents, peers, and other adults that assured them an activity would be fun.

Given young people's emphasis on their own interests and on the importance of their own independence and leadership, when others are able to tap into their existing interests (the nature of which we explore below), they appear more likely to spark a youth's connection to an activity. In these situations, young people may see in their decisions primarily their own interests and agency, and discount the important influence that others have in providing information and framing it in attractive ways.

## Role of Neighborhood and School Contexts

Beyond the influence of individuals, particular contexts may also have an important impact on young people's decision-making process and the choices they ultimately make. Because the attributes of neighborhoods and schools are likely to create a variety of incentives and barriers to young people, it is important to consider the effects of each of these settings.

### School

School settings may have several potential advantages as locations for after-school activities (e.g., access to physical space, ease of program access for young people in school who want to attend), and many of the recent initiatives to expand the use of schools for after-school activities highlight such advantages (e.g., Dryfoos and Quinn 2005). Indeed, most young people with whom we spoke see several advantages to the school as a site for program provision. In part, they perceive schools as more convenient for activities than neighborhood locations.

Well, I think that for me it would be easier—I mean the way it is in school, because more people first know about it, and it's really readily available to you because you go to school. If it's like in a park district you have to find a way to get there and it's more like if you *really really* want to do it you have to go out there and do it. But at school it's more like easy access.

Schools are also often seen as familiar relative to many other organizations in young people's neighborhood or in other parts of the city. This may be a characteristic that is most attractive to young people who are somewhat less adventurous or sure of themselves, or who are especially attracted to stability and predictability:

I've been around here longer, I know my way, like I know my way around the school, I know how people act inside and outside of school, I'm used to it. And maybe if I go to new place I won't know how to act or how to understand stuff, the way they is, I won't know the way they is, like around here I know more how it is.

Although many schools experience problems with violence, schools are also seen as relatively safe and it may be easier to control these factors in school than in many of the neighborhoods in which young people live. In the words of one student:

I know it's gang problems in the school, but they can stop, stop the people who gang banging. Put them out the, the after school program. . . . [Y]ou can keep them from coming in. But that's not going to keep them, stop them from hanging out in front of it, things like that.



Unfortunately, for those who live far away or in dangerous neighborhoods, the convenience and relative safety of school may be difficult to take advantage of, and a common strategy for young people in these circumstances is to get home directly after school and stay there, or stay with friends or relatives in their homes. Beyond public transportation (which is not always convenient), transportation is generally not available to bring students home after after-school programs, and few “safe-passage” arrangements are in place to facilitate young people’s moving across dangerous turf.

Still, for some young people, the advantages of program provision in school are not a sufficient draw. By the end of the school day, many young people are ready for something different. In the words of one:

I am just more interested in doing it outside, because I’d be in school all day, I get tired of school. I just want to do stuff outside of school.

This may in part reflect the schedule of programs at schools, which typically follow immediately after the school day concludes. Young people who did not want to stay after school often cited the need for rest or relaxation. (This is consistent with how frequently young people told us they took a nap after getting home.) For some youths, non-participation in school activities is more about “push” than “pull” factors; rather than necessarily finding new settings elsewhere, some young people are simply set against remaining in school any longer than they need to.

School programs may also not be attractive because of the characteristics of programs offered there. Although we explore the importance of programmatic aspects in a later section, it is notable that many students described their frustration in working with school officials to create new programs that met their interests, or in not being asked by school officials about the kinds of programs they would prefer. It may be that the role of the student during the school day and the assumptions of teacher/student hierarchy make it particularly difficult for school programs to be responsive in either content or format.

For some young people, school as settings for out-of-school-time program provision is more fundamentally problematic. In some circumstances and for some young people, school may become an increasingly inhospitable setting as they move into later adolescence, and those who do poorly or feel alienated from the school can carry over these views to the after-school activities taking place there (Halpern, 2000; Chaskin and Richman, 1993). In the words of one young person with whom we spoke:

I just don’t like the school, so I wouldn’t want to support them. . . . This school just brings you down. I just want to get out of here as fast as possible everyday.

Those at the extreme end of the spectrum may drop out of school—and in cities like Chicago the overall dropout rate can be over 40 percent (Miller, Allensworth, and Kochanek 2002)—and therefore unable to take advantage of any school-based provision. Even among those doing well in school, young people can find school draining or

unappealing, which leads some to disaffiliate when they get the chance. But schools also generate other expectations that shape how they use their nominally “free” time. The academic demands of school have increased by the time young people enter tenth grade. Those focused on meeting these demands by getting good grades and preparing for standardized tests may dismiss other possibilities. There are both direct conflicts between studying and engaging in other activities and indirect effects, as with the young person who told us he quit wrestling because he was otherwise too tired at night to study. Young people who fail a class may be required to extend their school day to include late afternoon make-up sessions. Participation in some activities at schools (e.g., sports teams) requires threshold levels of academic performance, which eliminates this option for some. Participation also requires meeting the other behavioral expectations of the school, such as remaining in good standing by not getting suspended.

At the same time, Chicago Public Schools have a graduation requirement that students complete volunteer community-service hours. These expectations also shape how young people use their time. Some school activities allow them to earn community service hours, both inside and outside of the school building.

## **Neighborhood**

Beyond the school, the neighborhood setting creates both incentives and barriers that overlap in part with those at schools. Like the school, the neighborhood may be perceived as a familiar place, where young people feel comfortable. “We were around our neighborhood,” noted one young person describing her experience in a community-based program, “so we felt like that was our second home.” As with their view of schools, this familiarity was a disincentive to some young people eager to try new things (and with new people, in new places), rather than staying “around the same people all the time.” Indeed, young people frequently expressed interest in neighborhood programs or activities (e.g., visiting art museums, participating in cultural programs) that took place in other parts of the city.

Seeking activities outside their own neighborhood was also frequently a response to concerns about local safety risks. Indeed, only one half of ninth-grade respondents to the High School Survey say they have a safe place to hang out in their neighborhood (Goerge and Chaskin, 2004). Being in a program outside of the neighborhood might, for example, keep a young person “away from the things I don’t want to get into.” At the extreme were those who simply disqualified programs in their own neighborhoods as unsafe:

If there are [programs], I don’t want to do them in my neighborhood. . . .  
’Cause my neighborhood, it’s kind of bad.

Getting to and from activities in the neighborhood introduces additional issues of cost, availability, and ease of transportation that young people did not identify with school-based activities, and this is exacerbated in cases where young people live far from school. However, the extent to which transportation is a significant barrier is difficult to assess

and likely to differ among youths. For some young people, transportation issues are seen as surmountable if the program is familiar or attractive enough. We talked with young people who regularly take public transportation to activities far outside their neighborhood, but who bypass local resources. For others, however, public transportation may be sufficiently inconvenient to present a significant barrier to their mobility.

As a site for out-of-school opportunities, their own neighborhoods often presented serious barriers to young people's involvement in programs or informal activities. Interestingly, these barriers were also identified by many young people as important possible foci of attention and action. In other words, the deficits that make a neighborhood a problematic site for participation in programs led a number of young people to remark on the importance of interventions to improve it, focused in particular on cleaning it up, increasing safety, ridding it of gangs, and increasing the number and quality of opportunities available there. In addition to noting the need, some young people also indicated an interest in contributing to such change, which raises the possibility that some may benefit from access to activities that emphasize civic engagement and that involve them in organizing and social action in their neighborhoods. This is an approach that has proved effective elsewhere in attracting older teens to organized activities and contributing to youth development (Lewis-Charp et al., 2003; cf. Zelkin, 2004), and on which several community organizations in Chicago (e.g., Chicago Area Project; Southwest Youth Collaborative) are focused.

## **YOUNG PEOPLE'S ASSESSMENTS OF OPPORTUNITY**

Apart from the influences of other adults, peers, and the contexts of school and neighborhood, what young people do with their time is also shaped by their individual interests, by the nature of opportunities available, and by young people's knowledge of such opportunities and their interpretation of the likely value of participating in them. Accordingly, we asked young people about the array of programs, activities, facilities, and opportunities available to them, as well as any perceived gaps in these opportunities. We also asked about the specific qualities of these opportunities that are most important to them and what they hope to get out of their participation in any of them.

### **Array of Out-of-School Opportunities**

Earlier studies of how young people use their time out of school indicate that interest and participation are highly correlated, though which comes first is not clear (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Garton and Pratt 1991). There are also many possible reasons *apart* from individual interest why young people might not participate in structured or informal activities, including limited supply or other barriers (Garton, 1991). To explore these issues, we asked young people about what was available at their school and in their neighborhood, and about any gaps they see between their interests and what they know to be available.

## Availability at School

Young people identified a wide assortment of activities available at their schools, and most said that there were many activities offered. In addition to traditional (and nontraditional) team sports like basketball, volleyball, and water polo, young people identified a wide variety of cultural and arts-based activities. Distribution of these opportunities appeared uneven across schools, with young people at one school frequently identifying cultural and ethnic clubs (e.g. Filipino Club, Japanese Club, Pakistani Club), and those at another school identifying primarily sport-related opportunities. Young people at the two schools where After School Matters programs were offered identified these opportunities in dance, computer technology, sports, literature, and drama.

In each school, however, many young people identified mismatches or gaps between these offerings and their individual interests. Although we cannot be certain about the extent to which this perception represents a fully informed conclusion, a mismatch in program content was the most common reason offered for non-participation in school-based activities.

I feel [availability is] good, but I don't think that they really have anything that like really interests me. Like, OK, they have track, they have choir, they have band, they have the Polish club, you know they have different things, but it's nothing that, you know, catch my eye, like you know 'oh I really want to be in it.'

Identifying the kinds of activities that might interest such a young person is no easy feat. There is no dominant theme in the list of things young people told us they want. They identified less popular sports activities (e.g., rugby, boxing, badminton), as well as a range of classes (e.g., cooking, nursing) or other activities (e.g., field trips, anger management, contests). Many young people, even when asked for specific examples, were able to provide only partial or vague descriptions of what they felt was missing. Comments such as “more activities,” “more opportunities,” or “programs kids are interested in” suggested an unmet—but unarticulated—interest.

In addition to a mismatch in the content of an activity, several young people believe that they lack the skills to participate in activities (such as sports, music, or art) that interest them. Although they are interested in exploring these activities in some way, they also feel that they are out of reach for them personally. In the words of one young person:

Everything is available but—like sports teams. You have to know how to play that in order to be on the team. So I think everyone's available to do it or try out for it. That's your own risk. You don't make it. You just don't know how to play.

Young people also identified some non-programmatic improvements they hoped for in their school, which concentrated largely on improved school facilities and supplies.

## Neighborhood Availability

In talking with young people about what is available in their neighborhood, we also asked them separately to respond to a hypothetical question about what they would *make* available if given the authority. Overall, young people identified fewer available activities in their neighborhoods than in their schools, and a different list of barriers.

A small minority of young people report that their neighborhoods provided many opportunities for participation in structured programs. This is true both for young people who live near their school and for those who live more than two miles away. The majority of young people, however, describe their neighborhood as having few (or not enough) opportunities:

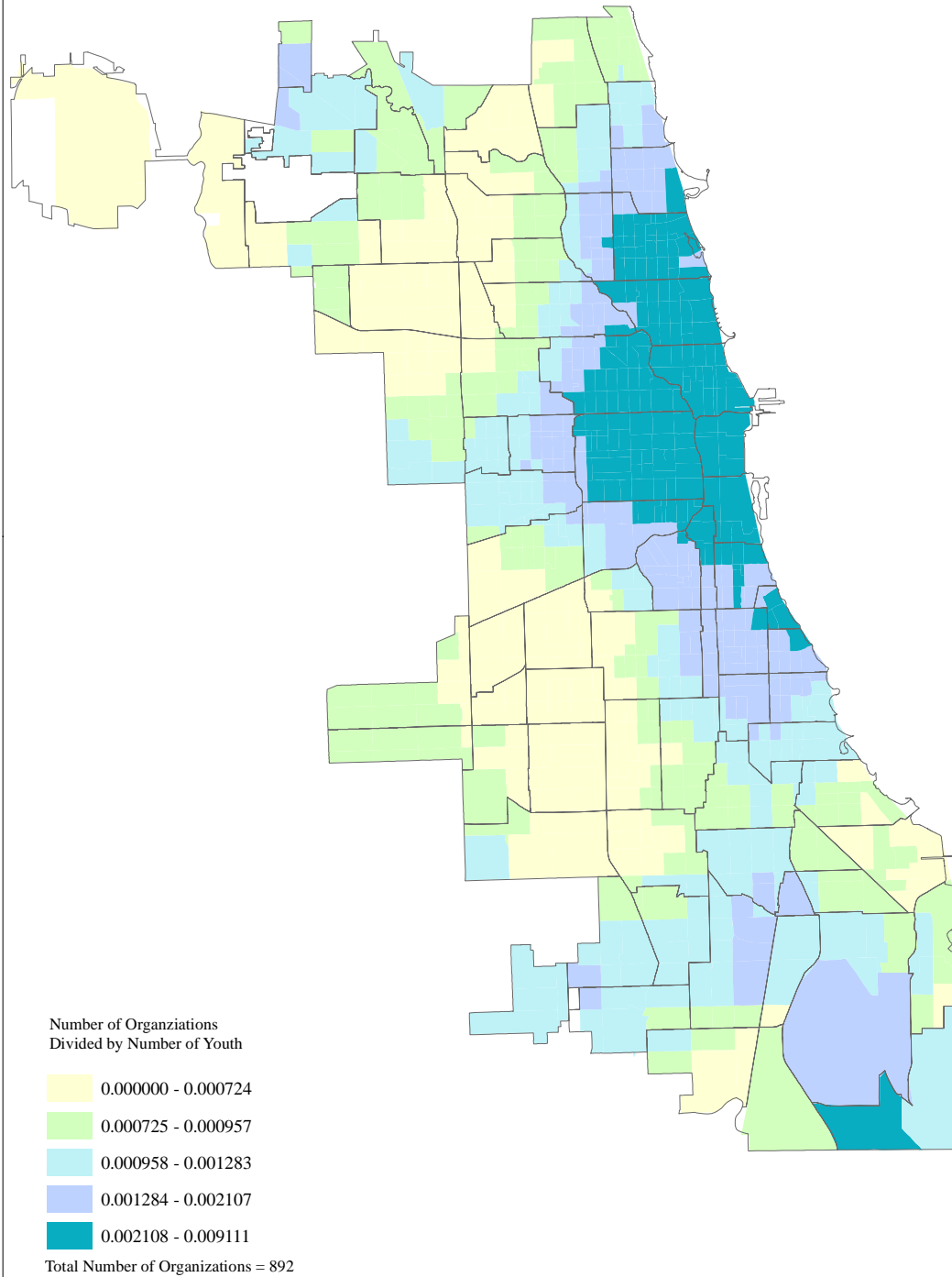
Where I live? Ain't nothing around there. Ain't no type of—there just liquor stores, gas stations. No grocery store. Ain't nothing for kids over there.

In part, young people's perceptions of the general lack of availability of out-of-school opportunities in their neighborhood may reflect the difficulty of disseminating information about such opportunities. In part, it may concern the social context (particularly with regard to safety) that their neighborhood provides and parental (and youth) management strategies to respond to this context. And in part it may reflect an actual paucity of opportunity. Obviously, as shown earlier in Figure 2, this differs by neighborhood; although programs are widely distributed across the city, there are clearly parts of the city that are significantly better endowed with youth-serving organizations than others. When one takes into account the distribution of the number of young people across neighborhoods in the city, the disparity in the distribution of out-of-school resources is even more obvious (see Figure 3).

Perceptions of neighborhood availability of out-of-school opportunities followed the pattern predicted by our school/neighborhood sampling. Young people who attend schools in "high-service" neighborhoods were more likely to say that there was "a lot" or "enough" available to them. Interestingly, however, when focusing on neighborhood of residence, young people with whom we spoke who live in neighborhoods that appear to be relatively well endowed with youth programs of various sorts were just as likely to perceive a serious paucity of such opportunities as those who live in neighborhoods much less well endowed. The consequences on formal participation are probably greatest for those who lack the motivation to find out about activities, like the young person who told us "I never really check up on nothing." This suggests, at a minimum, the need to find more effective ways to inform young people about what is available, and to provide clearer incentives for their participation.

**Figure 3**

**Number of Programs Serving Youth 13 to 18 in 2.3 Mile Buffer/  
Number of Youth Under Age 18 in 2.3 Mile Buffer**



Those who did identify activities in the neighborhood, however, also noted the same mismatch as existed in the schools; some programs or opportunities might exist, but they did not meet the young person's interest:

There's not much to do by my neighborhood. There's a library over there.  
Uh, a park that's close to there. They usually have programs and stuff.

Young people identified a range of activities they believed were missing from their neighborhood. These commonly include popular sports like basketball or swimming, and less common ones like cricket or foursquare. New recreational activities were also popular requests, and included such things as using computers, music, dancing, art, and board games. Young people also express interest in increased opportunities for mentoring and homework support. Some are interested in specific mentoring opportunities focused on career guidance, while others suggest that some young people just need "someone to talk to."

At least as important as the specific activities identified is the way young people think these activities should be organized. When asked in more detail about what they would make available in their neighborhood, young people identified a constellation of activities and program attributes that contrasted with existing opportunities. Some express high sensitivity to age differences among youth at programs, and an interest in segregating activities by age. Young people did not want to participate with younger peers while being regarded, in some sense, as their equal. More generally, they wanted opportunities to be out from under unnecessary rules, inflexible adults, and strict expectations. Indeed, while this reflects findings in the youth development literature regarding attributes of good youth programs (see, e.g., McLaughlin et al., 1994; Gootman, 2000), many of the young people with whom we spoke were not speaking so much about programs as about a more flexible resource—safe space, facilities, access, ownership—that provide the occasion for more autonomous exploration, interaction, and relaxation.

The archetypal resource that young people describe in this regard is a multi-use center that offers a combination of structure and freedom (emphasizing freedom), learning and recreation (emphasizing recreation), and safety and opportunity. As important as adults are in getting young people connected to programs, young people provide several critiques of their roles in existing programs. Consistent with their interest in increasing their own voice in programs, many young people want adults to step back from decisions about what activities would be offered, and how hands-on adults would be in their provision.

Multi-use spaces are also sometimes seen as having positive outcomes, an issue we address in more detail in a later section. In the words of one young person:

I find that the more activities you have for children, the more out of trouble they would be. So just like a center where they can play different activities. Where they can hang out. Where it's safe. They don't have to

feel like threatened and pressured into anything. . . . Because if you have like a center for people where they can do things. Like you can play like air hockey and any kind of activities like that—sports. Then it would like have more people like enjoying things and like after-school activities than just doing other things that are illegal.

There is more than just anecdotal support for the wisdom of such multi-activity approaches. Some prior studies have shown a correlation between greater numbers of program activities and more positive staff interactions with participants and with age-appropriate programming and flexibility (Rosenthal and Vandell, 1996).

In line with young people's emphasis on the importance of shaping a context of opportunity beyond whatever programmatic activities might be made available, several noted the lack of social connections within and across neighborhoods and identified these circumstances as in need of remedy. Some made specific suggestions (e.g., a street party), while many were uncertain about how to help people to "get along." Young people also wanted to create an environment where they and others would feel safe, including from gang members and drug dealers. Many young people also wanted more job opportunities, or described more generally their interest in finding employment. Jobs were described as an important avenue to greater autonomy, but also as a way to keep young people safe and out of trouble. Finally, many young people wanted a cleaner neighborhood, including cleaner and more updated parks, and cleaner streets.

### **What Makes for High-Quality Programs?**

Beyond the broader interest in addressing neighborhood circumstances and the desire for safe, youth-centered space and multiple, flexible opportunities, young people also suggested some clear preferences with regard to formal program characteristics. Because older teens often have more options about how to spend their time than younger children (they are more mobile; they often have more discretionary, unsupervised time), any activity that hopes to attract them must ultimately possess the qualities they care about.

As interest has increased in getting older teens involved in after school activities, researchers are starting to focus on this issue. The programmatic factors that existing literature suggests are associated with young people's preferences and positive youth development outcomes—e.g., positive youth-adult relationships, peer support, youth engagement, leadership opportunities (Grossman et al., 2002; McLaughlin et al., 1994; Gootman, 2000)—are largely reflected in what young people told us, along with some refinements. Some of the literature also suggests that older teens appear to be motivated by engaging activities, job opportunities, academic help, and relationships with adult staff (Herrera and Arbreton, 2003), as well as by "gregarious" and social activities (Garton and Pratt, 1991).

Having reviewed the influences of other individuals and contexts, we turn now to understanding the views of young people themselves and what they value most in an



activity. This topic arose at several points in our interviews, and we sought young people's perspectives on it in two ways. First, we asked young people to describe what they value most in out-of-school programs without providing any guidance as to possible characteristics. Second, we presented young people with a list of ten program attributes, identified based on indicators of program quality noted in the youth development literature (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 1994; Gambone and Arbreton, 1997; Gootman, 2000). We then asked them to identify the three factors that matter most to them, describe how each factor looks in a program, and why it is important.<sup>3</sup>

Table 2 lists the ten factors and the percentage of young people across all four schools who identified each one as part of their "top three." In general, these rankings suggest that *novelty and exploration* is very important to young people, including exposure to new ideas, new challenges, and new people. At a second level of importance is what might be called *social comfort*, which includes aspects of feeling at ease, welcomed, respected, and accepted. At a third level are *leadership opportunities*, including providing opinions and ideas and being given responsibilities. At the bottom of the list was interest in receiving training and instruction and the location or activity sponsorship. Receiving money was identified by about 20 percent of young people overall, but was not in the top three at any individual school.<sup>4</sup> We review the most important themes below.

**Table 2**  
**Most Important Characteristics of Youth Programs (N=99)**

<b>"Three things most important to you about programs or activities?"</b>	<b>% selected</b>
I am learning things that are new or challenging for me.	57
I meet new people.	55
It's a welcoming, safe, comfortable place.	43
I am treated respectfully.	32
I am asked for my opinions and ideas.	29
I receive payment.	21
I feel accepted by others.	19
I am given responsibilities.	19
I receive training or instruction.	10
The location, or who sponsors the activity.	06

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<sup>3</sup> To limit the possible effects of students selecting the first items they read, we generated lists with these items in different orders and used these different lists randomly in our interview process.

<sup>4</sup> The three most popular factors were not the same at the four schools. Chi-squared analysis indicate that students at Steinmetz were less likely than students at other schools to say that learning things that are new and challenging was important in a potential program or activity ( $p=.02$ ). However, they were more likely to say that feeling accepted was important ( $p=.04$ ). Students at Carver were more likely to say that being treated respectfully was important ( $p=.06$ ).

## Novelty and Exploration

Of major importance to young people is the extent to which out-of-school opportunities provide the chance to explore new horizons. Young people discuss this, in particular, with regard to the extent to which activities connect them with the opportunity both to learn new things and to meet new people.

Regarding learning new things, two themes run through young people's reflections. The first is that content matters, and that the specific content they wanted to learn varied widely (e.g., Ecuadoran dance, nature and biology, self-defense). As one young person self-consciously noted, "Not to sound corny, but I do like to expand my horizons." Learning about new things often also means finding out about new places; one of the benefits of being on a school team, for example, is traveling to new schools.

The second theme is the affective or emotional element of learning, or what it feels like to be experiencing new and challenging things. For many, the joy of learning is important, as indicated by the number of times the term "fun" was mentioned in this context. The satisfaction of overcoming challenges in learning new things is also important:

Life is basically learning new things everyday. It would be cool to learn something. Like something you never thought you could do—like playing the violin; 'I can't play it'—then you actually learn. It's a great feeling after you are done. You played a complete song.

Young people looking for challenges are more likely to mention the challenge of competing with themselves than competing against others. For example, a young person who runs cross-country describes it most centrally as a "hard sport" and one that you really have to "put your mind to." Another youth is proud that when she first started softball she was "really chicken, but now I'm not afraid." For other young people, it is important that the challenge was connected to measures of achievement:

At school, you play for standing in your division, or to win state or city . . . at the park district you just be playing. You ain't playing for nothing.

Regarding meeting new people, the most common reason offered was the expectation of learning or gaining new perspectives about others' experiences. Meeting new people is a way for young people to understand more about themselves.

Meeting new people is like—you can never have too many friends. So it's like meeting new people you could go and talk to them and have the same kind of things in common and you'd be like, 'yeah, yeah. I feel about that too.' And then it's o.k. So it's like meeting new people would divide you in so many categories that you would have so many different kind of personalities that it would bring you out more. It's like 'oh yeah, she agrees with me, too.' And then it would be like 'oh yeah well she's like

that too,' you know. So gives you more as a person. It brings you out more [as] a person.

Many young people also value meeting new people because it results in new friends, or hold out the promise of friendship. Taken together with the earlier finding that young people value the involvement of valued peers as an incentive to stay connected with any given out-of-school opportunity, it seems important to provide ways to combine both efforts to support continuity of social groups with an influx of new people in programs over time.

### **Social Comfort**

Young people's interest in learning and finding new challenges should not imply that all challenges are welcome or that circumstances of learning are unimportant. Young people seek out new connections and challenges, but largely within a context of comfort, order, and civility. Being accepted in a welcoming, safe, and comfortable place and feeling respected are important activity attributes.

Although the notion of "comfort" is sometimes used to describe the physical space in which activities happened, most young people describe welcoming, safe, and comfortable places by describing the people involved. Many use the metaphor of "home" in describing this kind of comfort.

. . . you don't want go somewhere you don't feel safe. And you want to feel comfortable there. You don't want to be all uncomfortable and feel that you're not safe and that something might happen to you. You want to be—you want to them to make it seem like you're at home, except with a different people, a different group people.

Feeling similar to others, and having a shared conception of values and interests is a central part of this sense of comfort and acceptance. For recent immigrants, an ethnic activity sometimes offers special familiarity. As one young person told us, "when I'm with Russian people, I feel like I'm at home, because I miss my home."

This same sense of sharing and exchange, and the expectation that they will not be unpleasantly surprised, partly underlies young people's interest in respect. Respect is a virtue of settings where participant roles do not seem arbitrary and uncertain, and where each party to an exchange is accepted *prima facie* as having worth and a valuable contribution to make. The young people who said respect was important do not believe they are asking for anything special, though they do not always believe it is offered:

. . . a place where I know that I'm not going to be respected is one place I will never go. . . . I don't want to feel like I'm a queen. I don't want to feel like I'm special. But I want feel that at least I'm not one of those people where people think 'oh, she's here again.' Or 'who cares if she's

there.' I don't want to be one of those people. I want to be where I'm treated with respect where people, you know, they admire me. They're glad that I'm there. They enjoy me. That's major.

The issue of respect appears to be largely one of equality and fairness, often expressed specifically as an issue of reciprocity. According to one young person, "I treat a lot of people with respect. So I think I should receive respect back."

Respect is something that happens at a personal level, and may reflect individual reactions of peers or adults. But it is also seen as a product of institutional cultures and rules. That sense of fairness is seen by a number of young people as compromised in some schools, especially in light of recent changes that emphasize zero-tolerance security and control. The instruments of rules and authority may serve to emphasize the gap between the respect that is hoped for and what actually happens, and may limit the viability of schools as a site for out-of-school-time activities for some students, and the potential importance of other options. As one young person described it:

As I was saying before, the security guards and what not and their misuse of authority, really. And how they would go and harass me because I'm thirty seconds late for class. Not get the people making noise in the hallway—you know the real troublemakers. 'Cause I mean I just try to behave as much as I can. . . . But, it seems to me like the staff, they don't really *care*. They don't *care* about the students enough. . . . Because I think they take steps towards the wrong things. Like these hall sweeps—it's not really getting anything done, I don't think. Because, just like [another girl] was saying, she gets stopped and she's not doing anything wrong and that they don't go the real people causing the problems. They just go for anyone.

Another young person finds a similar element of respect missing in his school, and his comments again reflect the desire for a place and space that is safe, flexible, and youth-centered:

'Cause you know at school, there's a lot of things going on. [A respectful program should be] just somewhere you can go be relaxed and be like cool with everybody, you know. You don't have to worry about nobody arguing all the time. And sitting next to somebody. You yelling at somebody all the time. Everybody just relaxed and just having fun.

Some programs within schools, of course, get high marks from young people on this score, and schools are not the only settings that come under young people's scrutiny for failing to provide safe and respectful environment for out-of-school opportunities. Neighborhood programs can also lack this critical feature.

## Leadership Opportunities

Participating in programs with respectful interactions is only part of the battle for young people. They not only want to feel they can have balanced exchanges with adults and peers, but often want to tip that balance toward leadership itself. As part of this, young people want to be able to express their ideas and have them validated, and they want to actively contribute their skills and talents. This is consistent with the youth development literature (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 1994; Gambone and Arbreton, 1997; Gootman, 2000), and has become a foundational assumption of many youth programs. Although programs do not always achieve this in practice, often very simple practices help to establish an atmosphere in which young people feel they are being listened to and contributing as leaders. One young person described an example:

We are always, in cheerleading, are always asked. Go around the little circle, we sit in a circle, go around. ‘Well what do you think about this routine? Do you like it? Would you like to change anything?’ And I like that. I like to be recognized, to be noticed of what my feelings and my thoughts are, you know what I’m saying? Somebody asks ‘well what do you feel about this?’ And for me to have a say so in something, I like that.

This isn’t just a boost to the ego; it is part of what many view as an important contributor to young people’s maturation. A young person who wants to be given responsibilities “so I can learn responsibilities now and then be a responsible person later on in life” understands how this opportunity will shape her future experiences. In the words of one:

It’s important to be given responsibilities because when you are given responsibilities it makes you stronger, more independent, able to get more opportunities and you are trusted.

Where they are not asked for their opinions and ideas, young people often express frustration. This frustration is felt as a loss to individual youth, and is also a lost opportunity for healthy socializing and development.

Kids, they want it to be—they want to have fun and they don’t want to be like told what to do that much. . . . And a lot of people think, they be like ‘oh teenagers like doing this. Teenagers do that.’ They don’t know us. You don’t know that. So don’t automatically judge us by how you think we’re going to do. You got to actually get to know us and ask us what we like and what to do.

Or:

I’m sixteen now. And like if you be in a program or whatever and you got someone that’s older than you, they basically say ‘do this, do that; this time and this hour’ or whatever. They don’t ask you what you think about it. Mostly they just tell you what to do, not asking if you like doing it. . . .

It's great just asking what you think about stuff, and not just being forced to do stuff. Or them assuming what you like, 'cause they don't know. You got to ask questions to know how we feel.

Young people are interested in sharing ideas and being given responsibilities for individual developmental purposes, but also for larger social ones. Some are motivated by an interest in improving their community, or sharing skills with peers, younger children, or family members.

I guess I could say that I'm participating in everything that I would want at the moment. . . . But it's like I said. Like if there was a program about showing my abilities, what I could do in computers or what I could learn in computers, then I would join a program like that. Or if there was a program about showing little kids how to count or learn their ABC's, then I would do that too.

In their comments and preferences, young people reflect on the prospect of learning and exploring in environments that are supportive without suffocating their own initiative and interests. Once again, this takes us back to young people's expressed interest in safe space and a place that is in some tangible sense *theirs*; where, in the words of Robert Halpern (2000, p. 186), "the adult agenda is modest, if not held at bay." Although most young people accept the importance of succeeding academically, they do not want to re-create elsewhere the pedagogy and culture of their schools. Receiving training and instruction is much less important to these young people than learning things that are new and challenging, and new and challenging things are often tied up with meeting new people and going new places, taking on new responsibilities, and taking leadership in these endeavors. Some are conscious of how this will move them toward a more fully realized adulthood, and others are less articulate or seemingly unaware of this connection. We explore this issue in more depth in the following section.

### **Expected Outcomes: Goals and Expectations for Out-of-School Activities**

We can separate issues of what youth want in an out-of-school opportunity from what they hope to gain from it. There is little agreement among policymakers and program operators about the primary purposes of after-school programs for young people, with varying emphases placed on supplementing educational outcomes or on more broadly positive developmental goals (Halpern, 2000). In the United States, expectations tend to be guided by a fairly instrumental view of programs' utility, focused on their contribution to child well-being because of their promise to prevent problem behaviors (e.g., Kirby and Coyle, 1997; Catalano et al., 1998) or to promote positive youth development (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 2000; Larson, 2000). In some other countries, while the promise of out-of-school opportunities to promote well-being is important, policy is also informed by a child rights framework, which holds forth broad educational and leisure opportunities as a fundamental right of all children to be procured and protected by states (e.g., UNCRC, 1989; National Children's Strategy, 2000). These are quite different

orientations for considering the value of out-of-school opportunities, and lead to potentially very different kinds of expectations for them.

When asked directly, what do young people themselves expect to get out of participation in structured activities? We can group these expected consequences temporally. They may be seen as having immediate consequences, and also thought of in terms of young people's longer-term futures and goals.

Importantly, not all young people identify a connection between their out-of-school-time activities and other parts of their life. Indeed, almost one-third of the young people with whom we spoke do not identify a connection between what they do in their after-school activities (either formal or informal) and their present life or future goals. This response is more common among youths who reported no participation in formal activities during the academic year. Nonetheless, almost a quarter of young people who had participated in a structured activity did not make this connection.

In some instances, young people deliberately avoid linking their time out of school with other specific goals or activities:

. . . who you know [that is going to be] outside thinking about school on Saturday or Sunday!? Like 'can I do this for my career when I get older?' So I'm sixteen—I don't really think about that now. You know I just be outside.

For those who do make a connection, their descriptions of the immediate or near-term benefits of their activities varied widely. The most common category of benefits is broadly maturational, including learning responsibility or dedication, how to work with other people, or even becoming "a better person." Others want to stay in good physical health, or simply relax. Some have very instrumental expectations, such as addressing the community service requirement that they need to complete in order to graduate. Although these activities have immediate perceived impacts and are focused on what the young person thinks they want or need in the present, they might also be connected to a vision of the future. In some cases, the vision of the future described to us by young people is informed by ambitious goals (e.g., a career in the NBA or in popular music; professional careers in medicine or the law); in some cases, the link between current activities and future vision is much more modest. In the words of one student:

Because you are going to have to work, going to have to get a job. So they gonna be telling you what to do. Might as well get used to it now.

Young people also identify skills that they could transfer immediately from one setting to another. For athletes, participation in one sport might help them with specific physical skills in another sport. A young person who wants to improve his speed in football, for example, participates in track during the spring. There are also perceived cognitive transfers. For example, participating in a sports activity is seen by some as supporting or increasing problem-solving skills, or the ability to focus and concentrate.

For young people who connect their current involvement to goals for the future, these links are often straightforward. Many youths with whom we spoke said they plan to go to college. Those interested in academic performance and college typically list potential benefits that include beefing up college applications, getting an athletic scholarship, improving grades, and learning specific skills or knowledge that would be expected in college. Likewise, young people with an interest in a specific profession often make the same direct link from building skills and experience as a high school student toward the fulfillment of that training and practice as an adult.

Young people also identify several kinds of supports that they believe would help them achieve their goals. Parents were most commonly identified as sources of encouragement, advice and resources, as were other adults and family members. Young people also comment on their own drive, skills, and accomplishments as central to their achievement of these goals. Many talk about “back-up” goals based upon their uncertainty (or that of their parents) of achieving their preferred goals.

As we noted earlier, almost a quarter of the young people with whom we spoke who had participated in some structured activity could not identify a connection between their participation and their current or future goals. These teens exemplify the non-instrumental way in which after-school activities can be chosen, which contrasts with outside expectations about career- or future-oriented participation in activities. Indeed, some young people specifically choose activities that do not connect with their future goals, since these provide relaxation or fun. Their interest in separating activities from specific goals and outside expectations of academic and career interests is even stronger when talking about informal activities. An important part of being a teenager is having fun, relaxing, and getting away from the stresses that include school, family, and some peers.

Although it is tempting to suggest that the number of young people who do not link their formal activities to any specific future goals is problematic, we should be cautious about condemning programs because they are not instrumental enough. Expecting programs to fulfill this kind of instrumental purpose may place an inappropriate burden on them. At least for some young people, it is appropriate that activities allow them to explore new options, rather than simply serving as extensions of existing expectations (Halpern, 2000).

### **NEGOTIATING OPPORTUNITY AND CONSTRAINT: SOME CASE EXAMPLES**

The foregoing analysis provides insight into the opportunities, influences, constraints, and strategic responses of young people to the environments, relationships, and programmatic options available to them in their schools and neighborhoods. In doing so, it provides an understanding of how they negotiate among opportunity and constraint to



determine how they will spend their out-of-school time, and to what possible end. The focus has been on young people as a group, with the intent to draw general conclusions by synthesizing across individual narratives and interview responses to uncover patterns of shared and divergent meanings, values, and experience. Before distilling these conclusions further and providing some of the concrete recommendations for practice and policy they might imply (to which we turn in the final section of this report), we focus briefly on presenting a small set of illustrative vignettes—brief case studies of the circumstances and pathways chosen by a few individual students—in order to ground the general patterns and conclusions reached thus far in the concrete experience of some of the young people with whom we spoke. In doing so, we seek both to make more immediate the processes through which young people move in responding to their circumstances and to sharpen some possible responses to the barriers and complexities they face.

These vignettes present young people who vary with regard to the levels of out-of-school opportunities available to them in their neighborhoods and the schools they attend, and in how they appear to respond to opportunities around them. Examining this variation allows us to explore the specific negotiations and choices that youths make in contexts that are both similar and different.

### **Case #1**

Hector is a Latino student at Steinmetz High School who lives with his parents and older brother and sister. His mother is from Nicaragua and his father is from Ecuador. He takes one honors class and is “trying to hang on there.” He does not currently participate in structured activities after school.

A typical day after school for Hector includes wandering the property around the school for a while before going home, turning on the computer and playing videogames. On Fridays, he may spend time with his parents, or with two or three friends. When with his friends, they may buy a snack at a neighborhood store and hang out in front of a neighborhood church, talking about girls or new games. Sometimes they hang out at one of their houses, though they recently stopped going to one friend’s house, since he “gets mad easily” and the evenings often ended with a “fight.” Although Hector spends a lot of time with friends, hanging out with them “can be boring because we don’t really do anything.” He gets bored with the computer and video games too, but doesn’t find anything else when he goes outside to look for other options.

His older brother works at a “Chuck E. Cheese” at the mall, and sometimes Hector goes with him to “mess around with the games and talk to the girls that work over there.” There is, he says, “nothing much else to do.” He may go to the movies or shopping at the mall with his mother and siblings. Hector rarely sees his father, who works long hours and late into the night. On Sunday, however, his father may take them to another mall or to the movies, or to his grandmother’s for a family meal. Hector feels his mother is “real picky” about cleaning and keeping the house straightened up. Sometimes when she asks

him to help clean up, he tells her he has to go to his friend's house. Other times, when his mother thinks he is doing homework on the computer he is chatting with friends or playing games. He is reluctant to tell his family much about himself, or what he is doing.

Summer is a time to be outside until early evening, riding his bike around nearby Riis Park, looking for friends to talk to, or playing basketball with his brother or friends. Despite his interest in basketball, he doesn't think he's good enough to join the school team. During the winter, he stays away from Riis Park; it's too cold, and the ice is too slippery.

He was on the football team his freshman year, but injured his ankle in the summer before his sophomore year and "lost two or three pieces of cartilage." He joined football in response to a letter sent by the school to incoming freshman boys. He thought it would be better than going home after school, and he and a friend decided to try out together. That friend later transferred to another school, so Hector is not sure he wants to rejoin—even though football was fun, and girls would tell him he played well. He also liked the discipline his coach provided, since "I'll be sometimes lazy and I don't do nothing." Despite his uncertainty about rejoining the team, he sometimes lifts weights after school. This is a way to "get more muscles" and avoid going home.

Hector describes difficulty in organizing his time and following through on his plans. He struggles to identify what he would look for in a structured activity, though he's certain he doesn't want anything "too strict." He is most interested in being comfortable and feeling accepted. Hector has a vague interest in rugby, though he also says he doesn't want to stay after school for a program or activity.

Hector says his neighborhood is nice, and that "they don't really have much problems here." However, there is "nothing really" to do in his neighborhood. There are mostly old people on the block. He worries that, when he walks through Polish neighborhoods around the school, they think he is a gangbanger and might have a gun. He also likes his school, and especially seeing his friends and teachers. As much as he likes his teachers, he says he is not influenced by them. In general, he is frustrated with the hostility students express toward each other.

Hector doesn't have goals specified beyond graduating high school. He may have more ideas later. He can imagine being an artist, boxer, or doctor. It's hard for him to imagine himself finishing a school after high school, since he "might get kicked out because I usually get lazy and don't want to do nothing, and I get kicked out or just get stupid and do nothing." He likes to draw, but doesn't see any connection between what he does now and his possible future.

## Case # 2

Robert lives in the Humbolt Park neighborhood with his parents and older brother, a senior who attends a different high school. His father works night shifts, and Robert only sees him briefly at dinnertime. Robert also has a sister.

At the time of his interview, Robert was participating in two sports at the same time. He practices for track during his physical education period, and attends lacrosse practice after school. He's been participating in track since seventh grade, and added cross-country as a freshman. His brother is also on his high school track team, and Robert is motivated to match or beat his accomplishments. This year, his friends got him interested in lacrosse, and he enjoys the extra time it allows him to be with them. He also enjoys the feeling of winning, and even "showing up" other people who think they are better. He would participate in more sports if time allowed it—football and volleyball and basketball, for example.

On the weekends, he teaches communion to young children at a neighborhood church. He likes teaching young children at the age when they can start to read the Bible and learn verses. He likes to look around and volunteer at other churches as well. He and his brother are also in a Chicago Park District basketball league with mostly Latino teams—Mexican, Peruvian, Puerto Rican, and Cuban.

During the summer of his seventh- and eighth-grade years, he participated in the GEAR UP program, focusing on computer training. (GEAR UP is a program funded by the Department of Education that teams up specific community areas with a college or university and prepares middle and high school students and their parents for applying to and attending college.)

Compared to school, he knows many more people in his neighborhood, and feels most comfortable around them. He is less worried about saying the wrong thing in his neighborhood, and less worried about being pressured to do the wrong thing. People in his neighborhood know he doesn't do things like smoke; people at school, though, "get on your case" if he refuses to join in. His only close friendships at school are with teammates. This keeps him at a safe distance from people at school who would "offer me something I don't need." Other students may "call you names at first," but it's just names.

Her mother is not religious, but likes that Robert "keeps the faith" in the house. His father is a very strict person who expects courtesy and academic achievement. On weekends, his mother doesn't like him or his brother to go far unless it's for a particular reason, like a game or practice. They are not allowed to leave the neighborhood to just hang out with friends. "She kind of keeps us inside, close to her." He still has some friends from his neighborhood grammar school with whom he spends time. In order to spend more time with his teammates, he often hangs out at a park near the high school after weekday practices. The high school he attends is a long distance from his neighborhood, and since his parents know he often has to wait for a bus, this gives him "plenty of time to sneak in extra play time."

The most interesting programs to him are ones that allow him to move around. He was in chess club, too, as a freshman but quit because it conflicted with track and because it was too sedentary. It's important to him that the people in an activity share the same interests and can teach and support each other. Accordingly, he likes to spend time with people he knows and trusts. He describes himself as eager to be challenged and interested in broadening his experiences, whether intellectual or physical. He describes himself as a kind person, and a person who can get along with most people.

He offers two views of his neighborhood, and two ways of navigating it. There are people there who "try to start stuff" and if you don't stop them, something bad will happen. But the neighborhood also has a YMCA where people can get away from that and find people who won't start fights. "No matter where you go there is always going to be somebody with a bad attitude. There are also going to be people with good attitudes, so as long as you stick with those people with good attitudes, you'll be OK." He sees lots of opportunities in his neighborhood—Mozart Park for basketball, volleyball and other sports, and YMCAs in and around his neighborhood. The same holds true for the city: "there are a lot of good places to go."

He would like to use sports to get a scholarship to a good college. He is interested in computer science technology and engineering, and would like to develop video games as a software designer. However, he expresses some concern that he doesn't have enough access to computers. The waiting time at the library is half an hour or more, his family has one computer at home but several people wanting to use it. Also, his mother doesn't want him using the dial-up connection to the Internet since it ties up the phone line. He is not able to use the school computer lab after classes because he has lacrosse practice at the same time.

### **Case #3**

Elisha is an African American student at Westinghouse Career Academy. She rides the bus ten minutes to get back to her neighborhood, where she lives with her mother and younger brother.

She is not involved in any structured activities after school. Her time is spent primarily with one friend, though she often watches television by herself. A typical day after school includes checking in with her mother, going outside for a bit, and then coming back inside to watch television. She does not feel safe in her neighborhood, and she doesn't want to get into trouble, so she mostly stays either on her porch or inside. Another place she feels comfortable is her aunt's house nearby, or perhaps the home of a family friend. She sticks close to her family.

Elisha expresses frustration with how she spends her time. She says she'd rather go to a "teen program or something to help elevate my time, instead of sitting in the house bored, not doing nothing." She wants to be around other teens and engaged in fun activities that

will help her out. She briefly participated in activities with her cousin at a nearby recreation center, but she stopped going when that center “stopped doing stuff.” She describes being unable to find programs around her neighborhood, despite occasionally asking teachers about what is available. Her mother encourages her to find places to go, and makes specific suggestions, but Elisha believes that “nothing is happening,” and so stays home. What she does know about seems too far away, though traveling doesn’t seem to be an insurmountable problem; she feels comfortable using public transportation. The programs available at school don’t appeal to her, though she does feel more comfortable and familiar with her school than with the idea of going to a new place in her neighborhood. She sometimes stays after school to observe her peers participating in programs, but does not want to join them.

There are many things she wants to learn from someone who could point her in the right direction: how to structure her life, how not to drop out of school, how to avoid AIDS, how to get along with other people, and how to help her with a career and other plans for her life. She says she is not picky about who might serve as a mentor—a teacher, pastor, volunteer, parent, or grandparent. In the absence of adults who successfully fulfill the mentoring role for her, she sometimes watches TV for guidance.

The three most important things to Elisha in a program are being treated respectfully, meeting new people, and learning new things. She wants to feel she is understood, accepted for who she is, and not responded to “with attitude.” Meeting new people would provide her with new models for how people “handle different situations,” and the opportunity to get and provide help to others. The structure of a program doesn’t matter—it can be as formal as a classroom, or more collaborative. A program should be able to “fill up” her time, and teach her something, too.

She has several ideas about her future professional life. Her study concentration at school is in health, consistent with her interest in being a nurse or a doctor. But she also wants to be a lawyer, and to work on computers. She would like a program that would teach her something about these interests. Though she has not been able to find the extra guidance and learning opportunities she would like, she believes she has a “good shot” at her professional aspirations, as long as she keeps studying. She believes she has enough support at home and at school.

In addition to focusing on her own development, she would like to find a way to change her neighborhood environment. She would like to work with other teens to make improvements: cleaning up the streets, picking up garbage, helping kids understand the perils of selling drugs and trying to get them off the streets. Ultimately, kids should have a chance to play outside without “getting their stuff taken from them and getting beat up.”

#### **Case #4**

Jameel is an African American boy living in Garfield Park. He lives with his mother and two sisters.

Jameel played school football as a sophomore, after missing the freshman season because his mother said his grades weren't good enough. He has a "great coach" who treats students like his sons. It's like a "big family." The coach also has connections to colleges that offer football scholarships.

During the winter and spring, he spends much of his time after school at the Boys and Girls Club in his neighborhood. He's been going to the Boys and Girls Club since he was 4 years old because his grandmother used to work in the kitchen there. While there he swims, plays basketball and pool, and "has fun" with other people. He also participates in the Boys and Girls Club "Keystone Club," planning events, helping to raise funds, and hosting twice-annual exchanges with young people at other clubs. The Boys and Girls Club has adults who take an interest in him, and with whom he has a "kind of a relationship." The man at the front desk talks to people as they come in to "see what's happening;" the director walks around and visits; and the supervisor of the gym talks to everyone. Jameel mostly plays basketball, but sometimes does homework in the auditorium reserved for that. The attributes of the club match his general description of what he looks for in programs: a combination of learning and having fun.

He often takes a break between school and the club—taking a nap, getting something to eat, or watching a movie at home. Although he says he goes to the club every day, he also says it is not a priority. He goes because he has "nothing else to do." He thinks sitting in the house alone is not good—it's better to be around people at the club.

His participation in football and at the Boys and Girls Club provides him a way to offer his opinions and support activities he cares about, learn new things, and meet new people in a context that feels comfortable and welcoming. He feels encouraged by those at the club to stay focused in order to make as much progress in his life as possible, while also supporting him if he needs to "move on to something else." His participation in the Keystone Club cross-site conference has also led to new relationships outside the neighborhood, and a chance to participate in events at another club. He believes that after-school tutoring activities at his high school would benefit from an atmosphere where students could "loosen up" by meeting in a less formal place with other activities and interactions, rather than meeting in the school library.

The weekends are for hanging out with friends at the mall or at friends' houses. Someone's parent is around "in case something breaks." He has a group of friends he trusts, and he likes to stay with them; about half of his friends also go to the Boys and Girls Club. Hanging out is a way to be with "cool people" and learn different things while having fun.

Jameel has a general sense that there are places in the city he'd like to see beyond the west side of Chicago, and opportunities for students that many don't take advantage of. Youths who don't take advantage of these simply "don't want to put in any efforts." When pressed to explain their choices, Jameel speculates that only one-third of the students know about what is available. The rest are occupied with basic routines of life (e.g., sitting in the house, eating, talking on the phone) that do not inform them about

other options. More generally, “people that have negative attitudes get negative things back, so if you have a positive attitude then you will get positive things back.”

He doesn’t worry about his safety in his own neighborhood, because he’s lived in his same house since birth and feels he knows most of the people around. And there are lots of things to do in the neighborhood, with half a dozen or more clubs in a 10 mile radius.

There are times he’d like the Boys and Girls Club to be more available. During the school year, he’d like it to be open on weekends. In the summer, the Boys and Girls Club is open for camp, but not the regular program available during the school year. Instead, Jameel spends his time playing football or baseball and walking around outside.

Jameel describes his mother as mostly supportive of his outside activities, since she wants her son to grow up and not be “cooped up in the house all day.” His mother also advises him on the value of preparing for a career other than football, since he may get injured and may need something to “fall back on.” He has a female math teacher who offers advice on a range of academic and life topics, and he values her influence. To Jameel, “it’s like I got a mother in school and a mother at home.” He wants to graduate with a high enough GPA to attend college, but has no other specific life goals.

### **Options, Contexts, and the Dynamics of Choice**

These brief case narratives give a sense of the complex dynamics among individual characteristics, interpersonal relations, neighborhood and school context, and the nature of opportunity for participation in out-of-school-time activities that young people encounter and negotiate in their daily lives. At the individual level, young people differ in the level of their motivation, the nature of their interests, their knowledge of available opportunity, and their capacity and inclination to seek out and become engaged in activities that may interest them. Similarly, their relationships and reliance on peers, family, and other adults differ, and have differential impacts on how young people ultimately spend their time. The degree to which they feel safe and are positively connected to their neighborhoods and schools also differs, and this conditions where they look for opportunities, when they might avail themselves of them, and whether they choose to engage in them at all. The array of opportunities and activities that exist, the attributes of the programs themselves, and the people associated with them also play a role in shaping young people’s decision making and time use.

Hector’s choices, for example, demonstrate some of the difficulties students may have in extracting themselves from situations that do not feel particularly fulfilling or rewarding. He can identify several activities that occupy his time, but they are often “boring” or contentious or engaged in primarily because of what they allow him to *avoid* (e.g., his parents or going home) rather than what they positively provide. In his view, he chooses from among a set of poor options, and although he finds it difficult to make choices and follow through on them, he does not seek outside guidance or advice on how he might spend his time. His attachment to activities is often tenuous, and unforeseen

circumstances—an injury, a friend moving away—can compromise his commitment and dampen his enthusiasm. He makes use of available facilities (parks, malls) for unstructured activities, but his access is sometimes limited by time, distance, or season. School and neighborhood seem equally available to him, but he is not particularly well-connected to either.

Unlike Hector, Robert has both a keen interest in discovering new opportunities, and the wherewithal to follow through on his interests. He responds to the role model provided by his older brother by getting engaged and seeking to compete. He is conscious of the effects of being in different environments, and chooses to put himself in contexts where he can be supported, learn, and grow. Although he does not always agree with his parents' views, he is largely responsive to them, at the same time making room for his own interests by stretching out the time he spends with his teammates. He is aware of his interests and need for programs that allow physical activity, and refines his participation in programs on this basis. Sports provide an outlet for his energies and are viewed as a possible tool to help reach future goals. He is well connected to his neighborhood, and although the immediate neighborhood offers a limited array of structured activities relative to many other neighborhoods in the city, he is well connected to what it does offer and able to explore opportunities further afield. This includes connections to both formal organizations (church, parks programs, the YMCA) and informal groups. He is less well-connected at school, and limits his interactions there strategically. His ability to reflect on his interests and on the aspects of different contexts that are positive or to be avoided, and his willingness to try different activities and continually scan the environment for new opportunity allows him to engage in multiple activities that match his preferences.

Elisha's narrative suggests a set of disjunctions that she has difficulty negotiating. She is interested in participating in structured activities, but is unaware of any to which she might have access and is limited in her motivation to seek them out. She is hampered by distance, from school and from other programs about which she is aware, and by feeling unsafe in her neighborhood, as well as by her fear of getting into trouble should she venture much beyond her home. She is aware of opportunities at school and feels more comfortable in the school environment than in her neighborhood, but although she sometimes hovers at the fringes of school-based after-school activities she has not engaged in them concretely. She has a sense of the qualities of programs that matter to her, but little clarity about the activities or substantive focus that would most interest her. She has expansive ideas about her future direction, and a commitment to community engagement, but is not well connected to community resources, organizations, or relationships that clearly support her future goals or facilitate community involvement. This combination of factors leaves her relatively isolated, idle, and frustrated.

Jameel's choices reflect the interplay of many influences, including family, other caring adults, supportive peer associations, and responsive (and multiple) program options both in his neighborhood and at school. Although he became involved in the Boys and Girls Club because of his grandmother's employment there, he has maintained his participation because of the specific attributes of the organization and the programs and facilities it



offers. It has been able to provide opportunities to match his maturation and changing interests. In many ways, his connection to the club provides a touchstone and foundation for his out-of-school-time life. It provides space and access to relationships, a set of flexible activities, and a consistent option available to him. His participation in school football reflects his immediate enjoyment of the game and is made meaningful by the important relationships it fosters between him and the coach and among his teammates. He feels comfortable in his neighborhood and in his school, and his connections to both provide a foundation for his general awareness of and interest in opportunities beyond them. Reinforced by parental and peer support, as well as by key relationships with other adults in school and at the Boys and Girls Club, Jameel is able to draw on a rich set of programmatic and relational resources to enrich his out-of-school time today and contribute to his pursuit of future goals.

Taken as a whole, these four vignettes demonstrate the multiple and simultaneous influences on students' decisions about how to spend their time out of school. They also make clear that, although the factors that influences students' decisions can be separated out conceptually (motivation, relationships, neighborhood and school context, program availability, etc.), they interact with one another in potentially complex ways, and students find different ways to accept and push back against them. Finally, along with the thematic analysis provided earlier, they help to throw into relief some of the critical issues that efforts to provide opportunities for and engage young people in positive activities in their of out-of-school time may need to address. We turn now to some of the implications for policy and practice suggested by the foregoing analysis.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

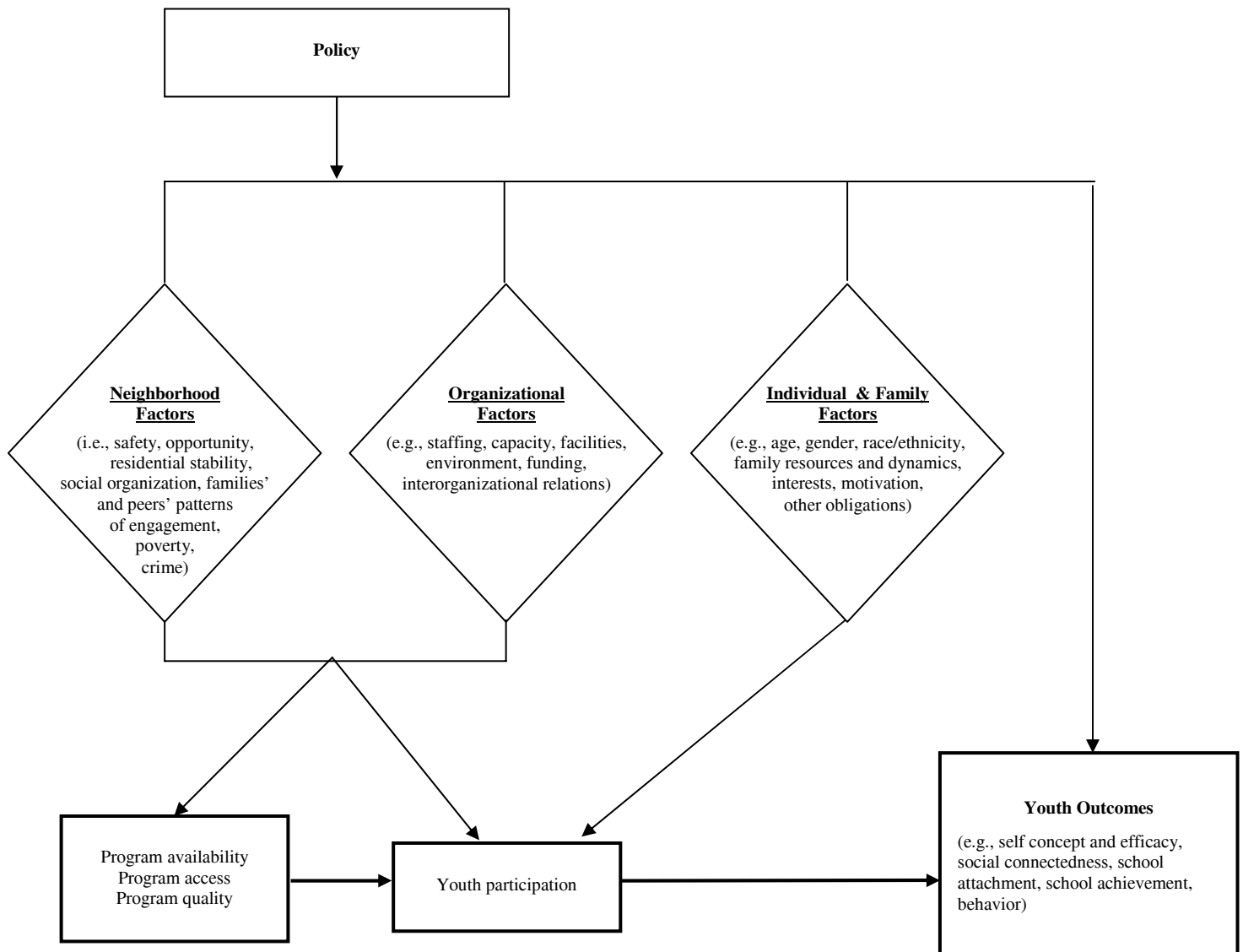
It is important to take into account the perspectives of young people when shaping policy and practice to promote positive opportunities for their time out of school. Young people's descriptions of their interests and how they respond to the opportunities, commitments, uncertainties, and barriers they face in their day-to-day lives, and their insights into how to respond to these circumstances, are instructive in considering how to improve and expand the opportunities available and address the circumstances that promote or inhibit young people's engagement in them.

This paper provides us with a better understanding of how young people learn about opportunities and the people and influences that contribute to their engagement and ongoing participation. It also supplies us with young people's views on the relative advantages and barriers presented by different contexts, their assessments of current opportunity, and their judgments regarding the nature of quality programs and opportunities that are likely to foster their involvement. Finally, it provides us a window into how young people connect (or fail to connect) their interests and use of discretionary time to their current goals and future aspirations. Understanding these issues, in turn, provides some insight into how to improve strategies for outreach, access, engagement, and provision.

In considering these strategies, we argue that it is important to take a systemic view, focusing not only on numbers of programs and the details of program attributes (though these are clearly important), but also on the individual, familial, organizational, and neighborhood-level factors and dynamics that may have an impact on program attributes (e.g., availability, access, quality) as well as on participation and, ultimately, youth outcomes. Policy and practice that seeks to contribute to young people’s well-being through their participation in positive out-of-school opportunities, therefore, need to consider the different potential levels and targets of intervention that contribute to provision, participation, and outcomes (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

**Factors Conditioning Program Provision, Participation, and Outcomes:  
A Systemic View**



Within this framework, the perspectives of young people that we have explored suggest some practical implications for improving approaches to outreach, access, engagement, and provision. We distill some of these implications below.

## **Outreach**

Young people learn about opportunities through a variety of sources. Although it is possible that a single source of information may engender sufficient interest in some youths to investigate further, for the most part single-source and passive approaches to outreach (flyers, letters, public announcements) are of limited effectiveness. Outreach efforts should incorporate multiple approaches and use multiple channels of information.

Information on out-of-school opportunities should emphasize in creative ways the characteristics of the places, programs, and activities that reflect young people's interests and assessments of quality. This includes, for example, the ways in which such opportunities provide new experiences and access to new people and resources, are youth-oriented (rather than adult-driven), and provide opportunities for leadership and autonomous exploration.

For young people who attend, schools provide strategic advantages as a place to make information available about out-of-school opportunities. Beyond providing such information about school-based programs, it is worth considering how to leverage the structural advantages that schools provide for getting information to young people in attendance about opportunities available *beyond* the school, in the neighborhood and other parts of the city. Relying on schools alone, however, is insufficient, especially for older adolescents (as drop out rates begin to increase) and those less well-attached to school, who are arguably those whom some programs, at any rate, most want to reach.

Most critically, although young people may learn about opportunities in a number of ways, information gets translated into interest and initial engagement largely through *relationships*. Outreach efforts, therefore, should seek to leverage such relationships wherever possible to bring information about opportunities to the attention of the young people they seek to engage. This includes getting information to and encouraging parents, teachers, counselors, youth workers, and young people who are (or have been) engaged to play a role in identifying and recruiting young people to opportunities appropriate for them.

## **Access**

Beyond issues of outreach, our analysis suggests certain implications for improving access to opportunities for young people. One aspect of this concerns providing multiple opportunities and multiple points of entry in different kinds of settings, including schools,

neighborhood organizations, and through connections to institutions and activities in other parts of the city and (potentially) beyond.

Schools clearly have several advantages as locations for after-school activities. They are relatively safe, have facilities and space of clear value beyond the school day, and provide both familiarity and easy access to programs for young people who are in school and happy to stay afterward to take part in them. But they are not inviting settings for all young people, and for those who live far away the advantages of access may be diminished.

Community-based organizations that provide activities in young people's neighborhoods of residence, or potentially in other neighborhoods to which they have easy access (around their school, for example) have other advantages. For example, they can provide safe space and a setting for positive engagement in recreation, informal education, enrichment, and other activities that is neither school nor home—and offer some respite from both. They can also offer flexible hours, and flexible programmatic offerings, in a broad range of locations across the city. But such organizations and the opportunities they provide are not uniformly available across the city, and many operate on limited budgets with the capacity to serve only limited numbers of young people. One response is to invest in building the capacity of such organizations and to provide resources to support their activities in neighborhoods that are underserved.

In addition to increasing the capacity of these organizations and expanding the number of locations at which they might provide activities, some relatively simple investments can be made to help connect young people to opportunities that already exist in other locations. As is made clear in our analysis, issues of safety and the strategies in which young people and their families engage in order to avoid risk place a serious constraint on many young people's involvement in structured out-of-school activities. A relatively straightforward response to the immediate problem posed by these circumstances would be investment in safe-passage schemes and reducing the costs (financial and otherwise) of transportation between school, home, and program sites. This does not, of course, address the fundamental structural issues that lie behind these circumstances, for which more broadly focused community development and organizing strategies need to be invoked. As some young people suggest, however, there is a potential link between youth- and community-development activities that some young people, at any rate, would be interested in pursuing, and that may play a small part in contributing to a broader community-change agenda.

## **Engagement**

Knowing about and having access to out-of-school opportunities are obviously foundational to young people's involvement in them, but other factors come into play that promote their ongoing engagement. As with outreach that promotes initial involvement, ongoing engagement is often conditioned by relationships. This includes both relationships among friends involved, the opportunity to make new friends, and the kinds

of relationships that young people can develop with caring, supportive adults. The strategic implications of these factors are not particularly straightforward, but at least three possible directions are suggested by young people's perspectives on these issues. The first concerns investments in the improvement of staff recruitment strategies, training, and professional development opportunities for adults working with youth, as well as incentives to retain particularly skilled youth workers, whether professionals or volunteers, coaches, teachers, or mentors. The second concerns targeting cohorts or social groupings of young people who might participate together in out-of-school opportunities and continue their engagement together over time and, perhaps, across programs. The third concerns strategies to promote continuity of engagement as young people grow older, since many young people base their involvement in out-of-school activities on their prior experience with such activities. Strategies to encourage young people to maintain their involvement from middle school to high school, for example, may have important consequences for their engagement over time.

### **Provision**

Other factors that have an impact on young people's initial and ongoing engagement in out-of-school opportunities concern aspects of provision, especially the characteristics of the settings and activities provided. One component of this concerns attention to the array of opportunities available. Ideally, young people would like to have access to a variety of out-of-school opportunities that respond to their interests, and potentially create interest in participation. Young people vary in how clear they are about the content areas that interest them, and interests shift in response to availability and constraints. One response to better matching interests to provision is to connect youths to the sites of such opportunity (whether school-, park-, or CBO-based) and engaging them directly in the planning and shaping of program offerings.

Beyond array, young people note several qualitative aspects of programs and settings as important. These characteristics—novelty and exploration, safety and respect, autonomy and leadership opportunities—are largely reflective of the characteristics of “quality programs” in the youth development literature (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 1994; Gambone and Arbreton, 1997; Gootman, 2000). Young people distinguish these qualities from the nature of activities and tenor of the environment during the school day; even when focusing on their interest in learning, the nature of the learning they seek in their out-of-school time is contrasted with the instrumental nature and approach to learning they generally experience in the school setting during the regular school day.

The combination of an interest in multiple and flexible offerings and the qualitative aspects of environment and programs contribute to a broad interest on the part of young people in out-of-school opportunities shaped around youth-focused settings rather than driven by program models or objectives. Thus, beyond (and shaping the provision of) particular programs and activities, young people are interested in more flexible, lightly supervised resources—safe space, various facilities, structured activities and unstructured

opportunities, informal access, a sense of ownership—epitomized by multi-use youth centers.

A final implication regarding provision suggested by young people concerns the way programs and settings might address provision for different age groups. Several young people suggest that younger and older youths should be offered separate opportunities and programs, except where programs involve older youths in training, mentoring, or supporting younger children, such as coaching, refereeing, or tutoring them.

One overarching theme suggested by many of these implications for improving outreach, access, engagement, and provision is that of connection. This includes connections between school and neighborhood, across programs, across organizations, and across age groups. It also points to broader issues, such as addressing neighborhood factors (safety, stability, access) rather than just adjusting to the barriers they present, and promoting organizational capacity (staff, facilities, relationships) rather than focusing only on programmatic investments. To better understand what is likely to be effective on these fronts, we also need to develop a more refined understanding of the “supply side” of the out-of-school opportunity equation. This includes investigating the existence and functioning of local “systems” of opportunity for young people, the dynamics of organizational provision and interorganizational relationships that sustain them, and the ways in which such relationships within local networks may affect availability of, access to, and participation in out-of-school opportunities and that may, over time, contribute to youth outcomes.

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